

Screen

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Mimesis and *Bilderverbot*

Public service versus the market

Permutations of the public sphere

Adorno, aesthetics, the social

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Early cinema, late cinema: permutations of the public sphere

MIRIAM HANSEN

There tends to be a moment in the development of cultural practices when discourses of the recent past become history; they are no longer just outdated but, like bell-bottom jeans, mini-skirts and platform shoes, acquire historicity. This is what seems to have happened with film theory of the 1970s and early 1980s, particularly as it revolved around the notion of 'the spectator'. I am thinking here of psychoanalytic-semiotic approaches, often inflected with Marxist and feminist politics, associated with the names of Jean-Louis Baudry, the later Christian Metz, Raymond Bellour, Stephen Heath, Laura Mulvey, to mention only a few. As has widely been pointed out, the paradigmatic distinction of 1970s film theory, its break with earlier film theory, consisted of a shift in focus from textual structures or ontologies of the medium to processes of reception and spectatorship. Whether concerned with the cinematic apparatus or with textual operations of enunciation and address, these approaches converged in the question of how the cinema works to construct, interpellate and reproduce its viewer as subject, how it solicits actual moviegoers to identify with and through ideologically marked positions of subjectivity. In either case, the inquiry hinged upon the hypothetical term of an *ideal* spectator, a unified and unifying position offered by the text or apparatus, even if, as feminist and, more recently, subaltern critics have pointed out, this position for some viewers turns out to be a 'locus of impossibility',¹ of self-denial or masochism.

I will not reiterate the by now ritual critique of this type of film theory, whether concerning its epistemological and methodological

1 Mary Ann Doane: 'Miscognition and identity', *Cine Tracts* vol. 3 no. 3 (1980) p. 29.

shortcuts, its monolithic notion of classical cinema, or its abstract, passive conception of the spectator and processes of reception; all important issues when the theory was still current. What I find more interesting is that the very category of *the* spectator developed by psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory seems to have become obsolete – not only because new scholarship has displaced it with historically and culturally more specific models, but because the mode of reception this spectator was supposed to epitomize is itself becoming a matter of the past. The historical significance of 1970s theories of spectatorship may well be that they emerged at the threshold of a paradigmatic transformation of the ways films are disseminated and consumed. In other words, even as these theories set out to unmask the ideological effects of the classical Hollywood cinema, they might effectively, and perhaps unwittingly, have mummified the spectator–subject of classical cinema.

We are only now beginning to understand the massive changes that have assailed the institution of cinema over the past two decades, in the most advanced form in the United States but increasingly also in countries with traditionally state-sponsored institutions of film and television. These changes are the result of a combination of technological and economic developments that have displaced the cinema as the only and primary site of film consumption. New electronic technologies propped onto television, in particular video playback, satellite and cable systems, have shifted the venues for film viewing in the direction of domestic space and have profoundly changed the terms on which viewers can interact with films. The spatio-perceptual configuration of television within the domestic environment has broken the spell of the classical diegesis; the compulsive temporality of public projection has given way to ostensibly more self-regulated yet privatized, distracted and fragmented acts of consumption. As critics have observed, an aesthetics of the ‘glance’ is replacing the aesthetics of the ‘gaze’, the illusionist absorption of the viewer that is considered one of the hallmarks of classical cinema.²

These changes have in turn affected the cinema, in the old sense of the public, commercial projection of films on theatrical premises. For one thing, there have never – not since the days of the nickelodeon – been as many complaints about people talking during the shows as in the American press of recent months, with pundits charging that the vulgarians simply cannot tell the difference between watching a movie in the theatre and watching a video in their living-rooms. What such complaints signal is that the classical principle by which reception is controlled by the film as an integral product and commodity is weakened by the social proliferation of film consumption in institutionally less regulated viewing situations. For another, the increased dependence of film production on the video market has exacerbated the crisis of the audience that

² See John Ellis *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge, 1982) pp. 24–50, 128–137ff.; also see Charles Eidsvik ‘Machines of the invisible: changes in film technology in the age of video’ *Film Quarterly* vol. 42 no. 2 (1988–9) p. 21.

3 Timothy Corrigan *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 23

- 4 Ironically, the European art film has become one of the more likely places for contemporary viewers to expect a relatively high degree of classical absorption. This may partially explain the success in the USA of *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992), a film that despite its double reading still very much depends on a classical diegetic effect (without which its trick would not work).
- 5 Among the growing literature on these developments see for instance: Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy', *Public Culture*, vol. 2 (1990), pp. 1–24; Mike Featherstone (ed.), *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 7, nos. 1/2 (1990) (special issue on global culture); Kevin Robins, 'Tradition and translation: national culture in its global context', in John Corner and Sylvia Harvey (eds), *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 21–44; Armand Mattelart, *La communication mondiale: histoire des idées et des stratégies* (Paris: Édition la découverte, 1992). See also Cynthia Schneider and Brian Wallis, *Global Television* (New York: Wedge Press; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).
- 6 See for instance: Hamid Naficy, *Autobiography film*.

Hollywood has confronted in various forms at least since the popularization of television in the 1950s. Blockbuster films, for instance, are catering to as many diverse constituencies as possible, confronting the problem of, as Timothy Corrigan puts it, 'an audience fragmented beyond any controllable identity'.³ These films – from *Gremlins* (Joe Dante, 1984) to *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992) – no longer attempt to homogenize empirically diverse viewers by way of unifying strategies of spectator positioning (as 1970s film theorists claimed with regard to classical films). Rather, the blockbuster gamble consists of offering something to everyone, of appealing to diverse interests with a diversity of attractions and multiple levels of textuality. All this is not to say that the classical mode of spectatorship has vanished without a trace; on the contrary, it makes powerful returns in the nostalgia mode. But it has become one of a number of options, often contextualized and ironized, and no longer functions as the totalitarian norm it is supposed to have been during the 1930s and 1940s.⁴

On a geopolitical level, this shift in film–spectator relations corresponds to the emergence of new transnational corporate networks that circulate movies and videos along with music, foods, fashions, advertising, information and communication technologies. While systems of distribution and exchange are interconnected and unified on a global scale, this process is characterized by a burgeoning diversification of products and, at the same time, an increased privatization of the modes and venues of consumption.⁵ New forms and genres of diasporic and indigenized mass culture have emerged, at once syncretistic and original, and imported products are transformed and appropriated through highly specific forms of reception.⁶ Thus, parallel with the demise of classical cinema, we have been witnessing the end of 'modern' mass culture, the kind of mass culture that prevailed, roughly, from the 1920s through the 1960s and is commonly associated with a Fordist economy, with standardized production and social homogenization, with critical keywords like secondary exploitation, Americanization and cultural imperialism. Today's postmodern, globalized culture of consumption has developed new, and ever more elusive, technologies of power and commodification, operating through diversification rather than homogenization: the worldwide manufacture of diversity does anything but automatically translate into a 'new cultural politics of difference'.⁷ But it has also multiplied the junctures at which such a politics could – and, in many places already has – come into existence, in particular with alternative practices in film and video.⁸ At any rate, whatever political score one may assign to these developments, it is obvious that they require theories of reception and identification different from those predicated on classical Hollywood cinema and the American model of mass culture.

spectatorship and cultural negotiation *Emergences* no 1 (1989) pp 29–54 and Naficy The poetics and practice of Iranian nostalgia in exile *Diaspora* vol 1 no 3 (1991) pp 285–302 Kobena Mercer Diaspora culture and the dialogic imagination the aesthetics of Black independent film in Britain in Manuel Alvarado and John O Thompson (eds) *The Media Reader* (London: BFI 1990) pp 24–35

7 Cornel West The new cultural politics of difference in Russell Ferguson Martha Gever Trinh T Minh-ha Cornel West (eds) *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art Cambridge MA: MIT Press 1990) p 29

8 Examples in the USA include Guenilla TV Edge, Paper Tiger and Deep Dish Television. On the critical status of such efforts see for example Patricia Mellencamp Prologue *Logics of Television* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1990) pp 1–13. Also pertinent in this regard is the ongoing debate over indigenous uses of film and video in ethnography see Terence Turner Defiant images the Kayapo appropriation of video', *Anthropology Today*, vol 8 no 6 (1992) pp 5–16

9 See, for instance, essays by Tom Gunning Charles Musser and others collected in Thomas Elsaesser (ed with Adam Barker) *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative* (London: BFI 1990) Gunning An aesthetic of astonishment early film and the incredulous spectator *Art & Text*, no 34 (1989) pp 31–45 Noël Burch 'Porter, or ambivalence' *Screen* vol 19 no 4 (1978/9), pp 91–105 and *Life to Those Shadows* trans and ed Ben Brewster (Berkeley: University of California Press 1990) Musser *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1906* (New York: Scribners 1990) Musser *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of

As classical forms of consumption and spectatorship seem to be unravelling on a worldwide scale, the situation offers a certain *déjà vu* effect. In a number of ways, contemporary forms of media culture evoke the parallel of early cinema. As Tom Gunning and other film historians have demonstrated, early cinema differs from classical cinema above all in the conception of the relations between film and viewer, inasmuch as these can be inferred from textual modes of representation and address and from a history of exhibition practices. Specifically, early cinema is distinguished by an aesthetics of astonishment and display ('cinema of attractions'); a presentational style that addresses the viewer directly (rather than indirectly, through diegetic absorption); a greater diversity of genres and more overt reliance on cultural intertexts (such as the commercial entertainments, popular stories and songs, or political cartoons on which early films are largely based and which are essential to the viewer's understanding of the narrative), a disjunctive form of programming (predicated on the 'variety format') by which short films alternated with live performances on the principle of maximum contrast and variation, and, finally, a dispersal of meaning across filmic and non-filmic sources; that is, the complementation of the projected film by performative activities such as music, sound effects and on-stage lectures which lent the exhibition the character of a live event (as opposed to the eventual integration of all cinematic materials into the film as complete product and inter/nationally circulated commodity). Some of these characteristics – the variety format, the priority of the live theatre event over the film experience – persisted well into the nickelodeon period (1906 after all) and throughout the silent period, even as the films themselves were increasingly patterned on classical principles.⁹

The comparison between pre-classical and contemporary modes of film consumption has been floated occasionally in recent years, charged with more or less polemical valences. In an essay published in 1982, Noël Burch observes that 'United States network television constitutes a return to the days of the nickelodeon', and argues, with considerable alarm, that the disengaged, disjunctive format of US television might represent 'a veritable turning back of the clock', a regression that is nothing less than 'innocent'. This observation leads him to defend, as essential to a politically progressive form of media practice, the otherwise much maligned 'strong diegetic effect' of classical cinema, the 'Institutional Mode of Representation'.¹⁰ A decade later, parallels between pre-classical and post-classical forms of spectatorship, between early modern and postmodern forms of distraction and diversity, are even more pronounced, though no less in need of discussion. What is the point of such a comparison? How can we make it productive beyond formalist analogy, beyond nostalgia or cultural pessimism? How can we align those two moments without obliterating their historical difference?

- California Press 1991) Miriam Hansen *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1991) chs 1–3. For the persistence of the priority of theatre experience over film experience see Richard Koszarski *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture 1915–1928* (New York: Scribners 1990) ch 2 and Douglas Gomery *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1992) ch 3.
- 10 Noel Burch *Narrative/diegesis – thresholds/limits* *Screen* vol 23 no 2 (1982) p 33 (revised in *Life to those Shadows* p 263). Also see Thomas Elsaesser *TV through the looking glass* *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* vol 14 nos 1–2 (1992) p 5.
- 11 Meaghan Morris *Banality in cultural studies* in Mellenkamp *Logics of Television* p 25. For a recent example of this tendency see Jim Collins *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and Post-Modernism* (New York: London: Routledge 1989).

- 12 The term derived from Max Horkheimer's famous essay of 1937 *Traditional and Critical Theory* trans. Matthew J. O'Connell *Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum 1986) pp 188–243. The term 'Frankfurt School' refers strictly speaking only to those members of the Institute for Social Research who returned from exile in the 1950s, i.e. Horkheimer and Adorno and their disciples. Since *Critical Theory* has lost its specific historical reference in recent US usage, the term 'Frankfurt School' seems to have taken over this wider meaning.

I suggest that drawing a trajectory from post-classical to pre-classical cinema makes sense not only because of formal similarities in the relations of representation and reception. More importantly, these formal similarities warrant closer scrutiny because both moments mark a major transition in the development of the public sphere. I am using the term 'public' here in the most general sense, denoting a discursive matrix or process through which social experience is articulated, interpreted, negotiated and contested in an intersubjective, potentially collective and oppositional form. My understanding of this term is indebted to debates in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, associated with the work of Habermas and Negt and Kluge. Indeed, I would argue that the question of the public is probably the most fruitful legacy of the Frankfurt School for film and mass culture theory today. This, of course, requires thinking of the Frankfurt School in ways different from the caricatures we have been treated to, over the past decade, by proponents of cultural studies – caricatures doing duty for, as Meaghan Morris suggests, the equally discredited 'voices of grumpy feminists and cranky leftists'.¹¹ It requires abandoning the monolithic label of 'the Frankfurt School' (which, more often than not, reduces a vast body of critical thought to the chapter on the culture industry in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Adorno's essays on jazz) along with the equally stereotypical confrontation of Adorno, the 'mandarin' and 'pessimist' high modernist, with Walter Benjamin, the bourgeois theorist who, thanks to the help of Brecht, could nonetheless envision a democratic, class-conscious appropriation of mass and consumer culture.

Rather than a set of fixed positions, the tradition of the Frankfurt School connotes for me a set of political and theoretical concerns, of questions and controversies circulating in the larger context of 'Critical Theory',¹² a context that included, among others, Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and Siegfried Kracauer. While no longer the loose affiliation of marginalized Jewish–Marxist intellectuals it was during the Weimar period and, to some extent, in exile, this tradition survived into the 1960s and 1970s as a source of radical thought, a critical framework to work with, contest and revise. It played that part for a whole generation or two of West German intellectuals, artists and activists, including feminist theorists (such as Silvia Bovenschen, Gertrud Koch, and Heide Schlupmann) and the independent film culture that emerged in the 1960s, associated with the Oberhausen group and Alexander Kluge.

This is not the Frankfurt School that hates mass culture. It is, however, a continuation of a project that registered, early on, the key role of cinema and mass culture in the profound restructuration of subjectivity. At the same time it saw the modern media's liberatory, democratic potential evaporate in their alienating,

13 Kluge summarizes Adorno's attitude towards the cinema in the notorious quip 'I love to go to the movies: the only thing that bothers me is the image on the screen.' Klaus Eder and Alexander Kluge, *Ulmer Dramaturgien: Reibungsverluste* (Munich: Hanser 1981) p. 48. For Kluge's relationship to Adorno see Stuart Liebman's interview 'On New German Cinema: art, enlightenment and the public sphere' an interview with Alexander Kluge, *October* no. 46 (1988) pp. 23–59, especially pp. 36ff. For Kluge's influence in turn on Adorno see the latter's 1966 essay 'Transparencies on film', trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique* nos. 24–25 (1981–2) pp. 199–205, as well as my introduction to that essay, *Babel and Babylon*, pp. 186–98.

14 Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Darmstadt: Neuwied: Luchterhand 1962), trans. Thomas Burger, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1989). See Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: London: MIT Press 1992), also see *Social Text* nos. 25/26 (1990), special issue devoted to 'The Phantom Public Sphere'.

15 See Nicholas Garnham, 'The media and the public sphere', in Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* pp. 359–76, also Benjamin Lee, 'Textuality, mediation and public discourse', *ibid.* pp. 402–18.

conformist and manipulative use in Fordist-liberal capitalism, to say nothing of fascism. Kluge may well have shared Adorno's analysis of the culture industry (and its administrative, post-war West-German counterpart), even if he gently mocked his mentor's iconophobic and paranoid tendencies.¹³ But he drew different aesthetic and political conclusions from this analysis: he became a filmmaker and activist promoting an alternative film and media culture. Drawing on Adorno's own philosophy, in particular *Negative Dialectics* and the concept of non-identity, Kluge set out to mobilize the aporias of the culture industry thesis – by switching the frame from the logics of commodity and identity to the dynamics of the public sphere.

In English-language contexts, the category of 'the public' has become increasingly important to a wide variety of fields and debates – philosophy, anthropology, history, South Asian, East Asian and African studies, postcolonial and subaltern studies, the postmodern art scene, feminist, gay/lesbian and queer politics. If public sphere theory has so far had little impact on cinema and media studies, it has been for a good or, rather, not so good reason. Many of these debates take as their point of departure the framework developed by Jürgen Habermas in his 1962 study, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which only recently appeared in English translation.¹⁴ The advantage of Habermas's approach, that he historicizes the concept of the public sphere by tracing its emergence in the eighteenth century, turns into a disadvantage when it comes to the mass-mediated publics of later centuries. Positing the Enlightenment idea of the public sphere as a critical norm (even as historically it has degenerated into an ideology), Habermas can view subsequent formations of public life only in terms of disintegration and decline. With the shift from cultural *Rasonnement* to cultural consumption, so for Habermas, the dialectic of public and private unravels into individuated acts of reception, even in the context of mass events. The problem with this approach is not only that it remains squarely within the paradigm of the culture industry, but that the underlying notion of the public is predicated on face-to-face communication and is hence insufficient for conceptualizing mass-mediated forms of public life.¹⁵ (If Habermas's book nonetheless remains mandatory reading for anyone interested in the counterpublic potential of cinema, video and television, it is because it elaborates the public as a distinct dimension, a *fourth* term that mediates between the state, the marketplace and the intimate sphere of the family, as an arena of discursive interaction that constitutes the condition of radically democratic politics.)

It is in view of this paradox – the problem of how to conceptualize the dimension of the public in a technologically and industrially mediated public sphere that has eroded the very conditions of discursive interaction, participation and self-representation – that

16 Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1972) *The Public Sphere and Experience* trans. Peter Labanyi, Jamie Daniel, Assenka Oksiloff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993). For a more detailed discussion of that book see my Foreword to the US edition also published in *Public Culture* vol. 5 no. 2 (1993).

Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's study, *Public Sphere and Experience*, offers a useful intervention.¹⁶ Like a number of Habermas's recent American critics, Negt and Kluge argue that the ideal of the eighteenth-century public sphere was ideological in its very conception, masking the *de facto* exclusion of substantial social groups (workers, women, servants) and of vital social issues such as the material conditions of production and reproduction (sexuality, childrearing). Likewise, Negt and Kluge insist on the need to understand postliberal and postliterary formations of the public sphere – crucially defined by the photographic and electronic media – in terms other than disintegration and decline.

Negt and Kluge's argument rests on two major moves. One is to call into question the very concept of the public as it is traditionally used:

Public sphere refers to certain *institutions*, establishments, activities (e.g., public force, the press, public opinion, audience [*Publikum*], public relations, streets and squares); but at the same time it is also a general social *horizon of experience* in which what is really or supposedly relevant for all members of society is summarized. In this sense, the public sphere is [on the one hand] a matter of a few professionals (e.g., politicians, editors, functionaries of clubs and associations); on the other hand, it is something that has to do with everyone and which only realizes itself in the heads of human beings, a dimension of their consciousness. [] As long as there is a contradiction between the increased socialization of human beings and the restricted forms of their private lives, the public is simultaneously a real expression of a fundamental social need.¹⁷

17 Negt and Kluge: *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung* pp. 17–18.

This expansion of the category of the public involves a shift from the formal conditions of communication (free association, free speech, equal participation, polite argument) to the more comprehensive notion of a 'social horizon of experience', grounded in what Negt and Kluge call 'the context of living' (*Lebenszusammenhang*), in material, psychic and social re/production.¹⁸ This horizon includes, emphatically, what the dominant public sphere leaves out, privatizes, or acknowledges only in an abstract and fragmented form. Predicated on inclusion, interconnection and context (*Zusammenhang*), this horizon involves the dialectical imbrication of three distinct layers: one, the experience of re/production under capitalist, alienated conditions; two, the systematic blockage of that experience as a horizon in its own right (that is, the separation of the experiencing subjects from the networks of public expression and representation); and three, as a response to that blockage, imaginative and resistant modes of realigning the sundered chunks of experience, of reality and fantasy, time, history and memory.¹⁹ Negt and Kluge's second move is that they construct this horizon

18 There are interesting contiguities between Negt and Kluge's notion of the 'context of living' and Michel de Certeau's reflections on *The Practice of Everyday Life* trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press 1984).

19 The concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) assumed here is a highly specific one, elaborated – in different ways – by Benjamin Bloch, Kracauer and Adorno. See Hansen, Foreword, *Public Sphere and Experience* pp. xvi–xix. Benjamin, cinema and experience: 'The blue flower in

the land of technology *New German Critique* no 490 (1987) pp 179–224 Of mice and ducks Benjamin and Adorno on Disney *South Atlantic Quarterly* vol 92 no 1 (1993) pp 40–1

20 Negt and Kluge adopt this term from Hans Magnus Enzensberger *Constituents of a theory of the media* (1970) trans Stuart Hood in Reinhold Grimm and Bruce Armstrong (eds) *Critical Essays* (New York: Continuum 1982) pp 46–76

21 We are interested in what in a world where it is so obvious that catastrophes occur performs the labour that brings about material change. Preface *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins 1981) p 5 Also see Fredric Jameson 'On Negt and Kluge' *October* no 46 (1988) pp 151–77 and Christopher Pavsek 'Alexander Kluge and postmodernism or Realism and the public sphere' unpublished manuscript

not in analogy to the bourgeois–liberal model, as a presumably autonomous sphere *above* the marketplace and particular interests, but rather trace its contours in the new industrial–commercial publics that no longer pretend to such a separate, independent status. These 'public spheres of production' include a variety of contexts, such as 'factory communities', spaces of commerce and consumption (restaurants, shopping malls) and, of course, the cinema and other privately owned media of the 'consciousness industry'.²⁰ Lacking legitimization of their own, the industrial–commercial publics enter into alliances with the disintegrating bourgeois public sphere, from opera and masterpiece theatre to political parties and institutions of parliamentary democracy – the latter in turn dependent increasingly on industrial–commercial publicity for its continued operation and power (The idea of an 'electronic town hall', which the Clinton administration adopted from billionaire–populist Ross Perot, marks a further step in this direction.) But even as the public spheres of production reproduce the ideological, exclusionary mechanisms of the bourgeois prototype, they also aim, for economic reasons, at a maximum of inclusion. Lacking substance of their own, they voraciously absorb, as their fodder or 'raw material', contexts of living hitherto bracketed from representation – if only to appropriate, assimilate, abstract, commodify vital areas of social experience, if only to render them obsolete once exhausted and thus again insignificant. It is in their potentially indiscriminating, inclusive grasp, Negt and Kluge argue, that the public spheres of production make visible, at certain junctures, a different function of the public, namely that of a social horizon of experience.

In *Public Sphere and Experience*, Negt and Kluge refer to this emphatically inclusive horizon by the self-consciously anachronistic term 'proletarian public sphere', which they see prefigured in alternative and oppositional or counter publics. True to the Marxian sense of the term, the 'proletarian' public sphere is not an empirical category (and certainly has little to do with traditional labour organizations), but a category of negation in both a critical and a utopian sense, referring to the fragmentation of human labour, existence and experience and its dialectical opposite, the practical negation of existing conditions in their totality. In their subsequent collaboration, *History and Obstnacy*, Negt and Kluge locate this utopian possibility in the very process of (alienated) production, in the 'historical organization of labour power'.²¹ For, while constituted in the process of 'separation' (primitive accumulation, division of labour, etc.), labour power contains and reproduces capacities and energies that exceed its realization in/as a commodity – resistance to separation, *Eigensinn* (stubbornness, self-will), self-regulation, fantasy, memory, curiosity, cooperation, feelings and skills in excess of capitalist valorization. Whether these energies can

become effective depends on the organization of the public sphere: the extent to which experience is dis/organized from 'above' – by the exclusionary standards of high culture or in the interest of profit – or from 'below', by the experiencing subjects themselves, on the basis of their context of living. The political task is to create 'relationality' (Jameson's translation of *Zusammenhang*); to make connections between isolated chunks of experience, across segregated domains of work and leisure, fiction and fact, past and present; and to identify points of contiguity among diverse and/or competing partial and counter publics. This politics of relationality is up against the hegemonic form of *Zusammenhang* – the violent pseudo-synthesis of the dominant public sphere, maintained by the alliance of industrial – commercial and bourgeois publicity, which masquerades as *the* public sphere (the subject of the evening news, the 'nation')

But this is not an 'either/or' argument. Negt and Kluge insist that it is impossible to define or describe *Öffentlichkeit*, or 'publicness', in the singular, as if it had any homogeneous substance. Rather, it can always only be understood as an 'aggregation' or mixture of different types of public life, corresponding to uneven stages of economic, technical and social organization, ranging from local to global parameters. If Negt and Kluge, for heuristic purposes, distinguish between bourgeois, industrial-commercial and proletarian prototypes, they argue that none of these can be grasped in purity or isolation from each other but only in their mutual imbrication, in specific overlaps, parasitic cohabitations and structural contradictions. (An example of the latter is the contradiction, in industrial-commercial publics, between immediate market interests and pressures of legitimation, which in the case of US cinema can be traced through the history of censorship as well as discourses surrounding particular stars.)

The irrevocably mediated and syncretistic make-up of public life contains a potential for instability, for accidental collisions and opportunities, for unpredictable conjunctures and aleatory developments. It is in the seams and fissures between uneven institutions of public life that alternative alignments can emerge and gain a momentum of their own.²² For the quality of openness (the root of the German word *Öffentlichkeit*) pertains not only to the principle of inclusion – of multiple identities, constituencies, topics – but also to the temporality of the public sphere. Conceptualizing the public as a mixture of competing modes of organizing social experience means thinking of it as a potentially volatile *process*, defined by different speeds and temporal markers. In the conjunctural dynamics of this process, Negt and Kluge discern moments of historical indeterminacy in which change becomes conceivable.

What is the point of thinking about cinema in terms of the public?

²² See Meaghan Morris's television anecdote (about the 1988 Sydney Birthday Cake Scandal) which offers a graphic example of the conjunctural quality of public life involving a fleeting appropriation or tactical intervention on the part of Australian aborigines (Banality) pp. 28ff.) Morris emphasizes the aspect of *timing* – a seizing of propitious moments – which tallies with Kluge's concept of public intervention: see in particular his 1974 film on the Frankfurt housing struggle, *In Danger and Dire Distress the Middle of the Road Leads to Death*. The name of his film production company is *kairos* (Greek for propitious moment).

23 Alexander Kluge On film and the public sphere trans Thomas Y Levin and Miriam Hansen *New German Critique* nos 24/25 (1981-2) p 206

24 See Negt and Kluge *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung* chs 3-5

25 On Kluge's television work see Margaret Morse Ten to eleven television by Alexander Kluge 1989 *American Film Institute Video Festival* (Los Angeles American Film Institute 1989) pp 50-3 Miriam Hansen Reinventing the nickelodeon notes on Kluge and early cinema *October* no 46 (1988) pp 178-98 Stuart Liebman On New German Cinema art enlightenment and the public sphere an interview with Alexander Kluge *ibid* pp 23-59 30ff Yvonne Rainer and Ernest Larsen We are demolition artists an interview with Alexander Kluge *The Independent* (June 1989) pp 18-25 Gertrud Koch Alexander Kluge's Phantom of the Opera *New German Critique* no 49 (1990) pp 79-88

Kluge himself, in his writings, films and video work, has been putting the politics of the public sphere into practice on several levels. Central to his film aesthetics is a concept of montage predicated on relationality – he refers to montage as the ‘morphology of relations’ (*Formenwelt des Zusammenhangs*)²³ – a textual climbing wall designed to encourage the viewer to draw his or her own connections across generic divisions of fiction and documentary, disparate realms and registers of experience. A film is successful in that regard if it manages to activate (rather than merely usurp) what Kluge calls ‘the film in the spectator’s head’, the horizon of experience as instantiated in the subject. The specific connections encouraged by the film respond to the structural blockages of experience perpetuated by the dominant public sphere, in particular, in the case of (West) Germany, the divisions imposed by the ossified programming structures of state-sponsored television.²⁴ But since the monopoly of the latter has been breaking up over the past decade, with a proliferation of private channels (close to forty) approximating the diversification of television in the United States, and in view of the complex and dramatic changes in the German – and European – media landscape, Kluge has reoriented his project. Producing a weekly programme for commercial television, he has been trying to reinvent alternative forms of cinema, a contemporary ‘cinema of attractions’, in the politically compromising, potentially neutralizing environment of advanced electronic publicity.²⁵

Beyond Kluge’s own, still to some extent modernist, film aesthetics, the concept of the public can be mobilized to address a number of key concerns of film and media studies in recent years and to take them a step further. In particular, thinking of the cinema in terms of the public involves an approach that cuts across theoretical and historical, textual and contextual, modes of inquiry. For the cinema functions both as a public sphere of its own, defined by specific relations of representation and reception, and as part of a larger social horizon, defined by other media, by overlapping local, national and global, face-to-face and deterritorialized structures of public life. This dual focus allows us to salvage some of the insights of formalist and psychoanalytic film theory – insights into the workings of cinematic texts and the psychic mechanisms of reception – while changing their paradigmatic status. For even if we situate reception within a specific historical and social framework, and even as the category of the spectator has become problematic, we still need a theoretical understanding of the possible relations between films and viewers, between representation and subjectivity. The questions raised in the name of alternative appropriations of late-capitalist mass culture cannot be answered by empirical reception studies, but need to be discussed in terms of experience (in the emphatic Frankfurt School sense which includes memory and the

unconscious) and the conditions of its possibility, the structures that simultaneously restrict and enable agency, interpretation and self-organization

The turn to (or, to some extent, revival of) more empirically oriented reception studies – and with it the methodological conflation of the actual social viewer and the spectator–subject – has been flanked, especially in Europe, by a nostalgic revival of the cinema as good object. In a recently published anthology of cinephile reminiscences, *Seeing in the Dark*, the editors complain that methods of empirical audience research fail to

fully capture the individual, subjective experience of film going, since they miss out idiosyncratic detail and the personal dreamworld. Measuring applause does not reveal that the movie was memorable for the woman in the third row because the building on screen reminded her of where she went to school and all those childhood memories came flooding back intercut with the film while the auditorium gently shook as an underground train passed beneath and cigarette ash fluttered down from the balcony in the projector beam.²⁶

²⁶ Ian Breakwell and Paul Hammond (eds), *Seeing in the Dark: A Compendium of Cinemagoing* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1990) p. 8

To be sure, empirical audience research misses all these marvellous – and essential – dimensions of moviegoing (as would, for that matter, a Lacanian–Althusserian analysis of spectator positioning). But to reduce these dimensions, in a subjectivist vein, to the merely personal and idiosyncratic means missing out on the more systematic parameters of subjectivity that structure, enable and refract our personal engagement with the film. These include, for instance, the particular cinematic style that set off the viewer's memory; the contrast between the nostalgically evoked local theatre setting (cigarette smoke, high-modern urban technology) and the context of electronic and global postmodernity (the likelihood, for instance, that the viewer in the third row, like the one behind her, may usually watch soap operas), or the fact that the viewer belongs to the social group of women, differentiated according to class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and generation, which renders her relation to the film shown, probably one version or another of classical cinema, problematic in particular ways. These and other factors structure the horizon of experience that we carry around with us, whether we watch a film alone or collectively. At the same time, that horizon enables and allows us to reflect upon individual experience, indeed, the ability of a film and a viewing situation to trigger personal and collective memory is a measure of its quality as a public sphere.

Thinking of the cinema in terms of the public means reconstructing a horizon of reception not only in terms of sociological determinants, whether pertaining to statistically definable demographic groups or traditional communities, but rather

in terms of multiple and conflicting identities and constituencies. Indeed, the cinema can, at certain junctures, function as a matrix for challenging social positions of identity and otherness, as a catalyst for new forms of community and solidarity. That this may happen on the terrain of late-capitalist consumption, however, does not mean that we should resign ourselves to the range of existing products and modes of production. On the contrary, the category of the public retains a critical, utopian edge, predicated on the ideal of collective self-determination. This perspective mandates not only maintaining critical distinctions with regard to commercially disseminated fare but also envisioning alternative media products and an alternative organization of the relations of representation and reception. In that sense, the concept of the public forestalls the idealization of consumption that has become habitual in some quarters of cultural studies.

Let me return, finally, to early cinema and its specific organization of the relations of reception. I have argued elsewhere that early cinema, and the persistence of early exhibition practices through and even beyond the nickelodeon period, provided the conditions for an alternative public sphere.²⁷ Specifically, it did so as an industrial-commercial public sphere that during a crucial phase of development depended on peripheral social groups (immigrants, recently urbanized working class, women) and thus, willingly or not, catered to people with specific needs, anxieties and fantasies – people whose experience was shaped by traumatic forms of territorial and cultural displacement. The problems posed by the cinema's availability to ethnically diverse, socially unruly and sexually mixed audiences in turn prompted the elaboration of classical modes of narration and spectator positioning. However, rather than taking the industrial promotion of classical cinema (and with it the gentrification of the theatres and streamlining of exhibition practices) as the prime determining factor, I see silent cinema as the site of overlapping, uneven and competing types of publicity. These include the more local spheres of late nineteenth-century popular amusements, new commercial entertainments such as vaudeville and amusement parks, and the emerging sphere of mass-cultural production and distribution. As a composite public sphere, the nickelodeon combined traditions of live performance with an industrially produced commodity circulated on a national and international scale: that is, technologically mediated forms of publicity coexisted with forms of public life predicated on face-to-face relations.

Above all, the conception of film exhibition as a live performance (the incompleteness of the film as circulated commodity) created a margin of improvisation, interpretation and unpredictability which made it a public event in the emphatic sense, a collective horizon in which industrially processed experience could be reappropriated by the experiencing subjects. Films were viewed differently, and were

likely to have a wide range of meanings, depending on the neighbourhood and status of the theatre, on the ethnic and racial background of the habitual audience, on the mixture of gender and generation, on the ambition and skills of the exhibitor and the performing personnel. In Chicago movie theatres catering for African-Americans during the teens and twenties, for instance, the non-filmic programme drew heavily on Southern black performance traditions, and live musical accompaniment was more likely inspired by jazz and blues than by Wagner and Waldteufel.²⁸ Although the films shown in such theatres were mostly white mainstream productions, their meaning was bound to be fractured and ironized in the context of black performance and audience response. I am not saying that such reappropriation actually happened in every single screening or every theatre, nor do I think that empirical methods of research could determine whether it did or not. But the syncretistic make-up of cinematic publicity furnished the *structural conditions* under which this margin could be actualized, under which alternative forms of reception and meaning could gain a momentum of their own.

This dynamic was not limited to the local level but could, because of its mass-cultural distribution, spread across traditional cultural and territorial boundaries. A case in point is the star system, in particular the rise of stars whose marketable personae conflicted with Hollywood's traditional racial and sexual orientation. As studies on individual stars such as Greta Garbo, Rudolph Valentino, Paul Robeson and Mae West suggest, there is never a seamless fit between studio publicity, fan magazines and actual audiences, and the push and pull among these forces have given rise to subcultural formations of reception.²⁹

Today, the frontiers of transgression are drawn differently, and transgressiveness itself has become infinitely more part of the game than it was during the 1920s. Valentino has been vindicated by a long line of androgynous performers, from Elvis through Mick Jagger to Prince and Michael Jackson, and Madonna makes us nostalgic for the aesthetic implantation of perversions afforded by the Production Code. But racism and homophobia still persist and the gains of the women's movement are inseparable from masculist backlash, the anti-abortion campaign and heterosexual violence. Now as then, these issues are negotiated through the most advanced forms of industrial-commercial publicity: then, a cinema and fan culture increasingly submerged into the hegemonic homogeneity of classical mass culture; today, a global electronic media culture that reigns through ceaseless diversification.

To return to my earlier question: how can we compare post-classical and pre-classical modes of spectatorship, early-modern and postmodern forms of mass and consumer culture? Obviously, we are dealing with substantially different stages of historical development,

²⁸ See Mary Carbine, 'The Finest Outside the Loop: motion picture exhibition in Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1905-1928', *Camera Obscura* no. 23 (1990), pp. 9-41; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, ch. 8.

²⁹ See, for instance, Jane Gaines, 'The Queen Christina tie ups: the convergence of show window and screen', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* vol. 11 no. 1 (1989), pp. 35-60; Gaylyn Studlar, 'The perils of pleasure? fan magazine discourse as women's commodified culture in the 1920s', *Wide Angle* vol. 13 no. 1 (1991), pp. 6-33; Hansen, *Babe and Babylon*, chs. 11 and 12; Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986), ch. 2; Pamela Robertson, 'The kinda comedy that imitates me: Mae West's identification with feminist camp', *Cinema Journal* vol. 32 no. 2 (1993), pp. 57-72.

not only on the social and cultural level but, fundamentally, in terms of the organization of capital and the media industries. Nonetheless, from the perspective of the public sphere, a number of affinities suggest themselves. Both periods are characterized by a profound transformation of the relations of cultural representation and reception, by a measure of instability that makes the intervening decades look relatively stable by contrast, anchored in and centred by the classical system. Both stages of media culture vary from the classical norm of controlling reception through a strong diegetic effect, ensured by particular textual strategies and a suppression of the exhibition context; by contrast, pre-classical and post-classical forms of spectatorship give the viewer a greater leeway, for better or for worse, in interacting with the film, a greater awareness of exhibition and cultural intertexts. Both early-modern and postmodern media publics draw on the *periphery* then, on socially marginalized and diverse constituencies within American national culture; today, on massive movements of migration on a global scale which, along with the globalization of media consumption, have irrevocably changed the terms of local and national identity

Early cinema could have developed in a number of ways; it contained 'a number of roads not taken' ³⁰ Postmodern media culture seems to be characterized by a similar opening-up of new directions and possibilities, combined, however, with vastly enhanced powers of seduction, manipulation, and destruction. Putting early-modern and postmodern forms of media consumption in a constellation may take away some of the *inevitability* the classical paradigm has acquired both in Hollywood self-promotion and in functionalist film histories.³¹ Drawing a trajectory between these two moments in the history of public life may make classical cinema and the classical mass culture of the New Deal and Cold War eras look more like a historical interlude, a deep-freeze perhaps, than the teleological norm that it has become and that has shaped our approaches to reception. And once we have shifted the frame, even classical cinema may no longer look quite as classical as the critical fixation on its dominant mode suggests.

³⁰ Tom Gunning, 'An unseen energy swallows space: the space in early film and its relation to American avant-garde film' in John L. Fell (ed.), *Film Before Griffith* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1983) p. 366

³¹ See for instance David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press 1985)

Mimesis and *Bilderverbot*

GERTRUD KOCH

Critical Theory has traditionally been held to have had a bad relationship to cinema and film, or at least a very critical one. If in the following I nevertheless attempt to prove the topicality of Critical Theory in this area, then I understand this attempt not only as 'redemptive criticism' in the sense given the term by Walter Benjamin (who could lay most claim to have created a critical film theory), but also as an attempt to mediate between extremes: for a theory of images, and thus of film, these extremes would be the twin poles of mimesis and *Bilderverbot* (the ban on graven images).

Mimesis and *Bilderverbot* crop up in Adorno's thought in differing constellations. I wish to investigate those lines leading towards aesthetic debate, which, although similar to his approaches to cultural anthropology and psychoanalysis, nevertheless lead away from the analysis of the commodity form given in the chapter on the 'Culture Industry' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.¹

Where film theory refers to Critical Theory it is usually by focusing on two diametrically opposed essays: Benjamin's 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction',² and the 'Culture Industry' chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In the latter the mimetic capacity coagulates into the compulsion which supposedly makes consumers conform to the images of themselves which the culture industry creates and which depth psychology then dredges up as its core in its 'concepts of order':

the whole inner life as classified by the now somewhat devalued depth psychology bear[s] witness to man's attempt to make himself a proficient apparatus, similar (even in emotions) to the model served up by the culture industry. The most intimate

¹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment* trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979) (First published as *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 1944)

² Walter Benjamin: 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' (1936) in *Illuminations* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970)

reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion – personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining teeth and freedom from body odour and emotions. The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them.³

³ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 167

The sublation of the difference between product and consumer, between appearance and reality, between individual subject and society takes place in the 'steel bath of fun' ('*Stahlbad des Fun*'), everything is struck with the bane of similarity, 'subsumed by identity'

In the course of the societal process, the embodiments of the culture industry become 'the flesh and blood of the public', aesthetic sublimation of the denigration of drives is replaced by mere suppression, by the reduction to foreplay, by the eternalization of the threat of castration. Under total domination, any difference between nature and society ceases to exist since society posits itself as nature. Human beings are reduced to hollowed-out monads onto which the machinery of the culture industry stamps its imprint.

One could say polemically that Adorno and Horkheimer never come as close to Fromm's much criticized culturalist concept as they do in the chapter on the culture industry – although not so much in Fromm's humanist sense, rather in the sense of a negative cultural critique: negative culturalism. In 1963, Adorno responded to his critics in a lecture entitled 'Culture industry reconsidered'.⁴ Although he retained the analysis of the fetish character of commodities of the culture industry, he nevertheless somewhat modified the thesis of a complete identity between product and recipient:

Only their deep unconscious mistrust, the last residue of the difference between art and empirical reality in the spiritual make-up of the masses explains why they have not, to a person, long since perceived and accepted the world as it is constructed for them by the culture industry.⁵

⁴ Theodor Adorno, 'Culture industry reconsidered', in J. M. Bernstein (ed.), *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge 1991), pp. 85–94. Translation by Anson G. Rabinbach, *New German Critique*, no. 6 (1975), pp. 12–19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

The fissure in the monolithic worldview of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which emerges here arises from a renewed recourse to the unconscious as opposition to manipulated consciousness. In fact, it is one of the basic assumptions of Critical Theory that instinctual drives provide a presocietal potential against the totalitarian claims of the societal process. Adorno, admittedly, never went as far as Marcuse, who in *Eros and Civilization* spelled out a positive social model on the basis of instinctual nature.⁶ For him, art and the aesthetic experience formed the only oppositional expressive medium left to an oppressed and fettered nature faced by social

⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press 1955).

restrictions and conditioning. Art is the wound that breaks open at the edges where nature and society rub against each other. It is to my mind, therefore, not accidental that in those instances where Adorno analyses film from the perspective of aesthetics rather than from that of the primacy of the economy and commodity fetishism, such as in 'Transparencies on film', the concept of experience stands at the centre.

Irrespective of the technological origins of the cinema, the aesthetics of film will do better to base itself on a subjective mode of experience which film resembles and which constitutes its artistic character. A person who, after a year in the city, spends a few weeks in the mountains abstaining from all work, may unexpectedly experience colourful images of landscapes coming over him or her in dreams or daydreams. These images do not merge into one another in a continuous flow, but are rather set off against each other in the course of their appearance, much like the magic lantern slides of our childhood. It is in the discontinuity of that movement that the images of the interior monologue resemble the phenomenon of writing: the latter similarly moving before our eyes while fixed in its discrete sign. Such movement of interior images may be to film what the visible world is to painting or the acoustic world to music. As the objectifying recreation of this type of experience, film may become art. The technological medium par excellence is thus intimately related to the beauty of nature (*tief verwandt dem Naturschönen*).⁷

7 Adorno 'Transparencies on film'
The Culture Industry p. 156
 Translation by Thomas Y. Levin
New German Critique nos. 24/5
 (1981/2)

What is striking in this passage is that Adorno conceives of aesthetic experience as taking place as part of an analysis of inner and external nature, and that this should form the basis for an aesthetics of film. The analogy between film and writing is conceived in phenomenological terms: the comparison refers to the graphemes of writing in terms of their mimetic reproduction and not to their status as language.

To me it is no coincidence that in the inner circle of Critical Theory (and beyond) from Benjamin to Adorno (and Kracauer) the materiality of the film image is grounded phenomenologically rather than symbolically. Critical Theory adopts a psychoanalysis which focuses on a 'naturalist' theory of instinctual drives, thus blurring any dividing line between it and anthropology. It is this which leads to Critical Theory's insights into a prelinguistic realm of human experience. It is in this context that the concept of mimesis, which occurs so frequently in Adorno's work, finds its place. Whereas gesture is defined by social codes and conventions (that is to say, a quasi-linguistic model of achieving communication), mimetic expression constitutes, according to Helmuth Plessner,

a meaning in that it mirrors an emotion (a state or sudden welling-up of internal turmoil) [. . .] In mimetic expression psychic

content and physical form relate to one another as two inseparable poles of one unity and cannot be detached from one another and framed in a relationship of signifier and signified (of shell and core), without destroying their organic, immediate and spontaneous quality.⁸

⁸ Helmuth Plessner *Philosophische Anthropologie* (Frankfurt Suhrkamp 1970) pp. 61–63

One of the well-known characteristics to be observed in actors in silent movies was that they relied overmuch on gesture, on acting in an exaggerated and theatrical style, but they did not utilize mimetic means. Actors from the era of silent films whom we still admire today, such as Asta Nielsen, excelled precisely because they possessed such a mimetic facility, in which what they wished to express merged with their physical appearance. Adorno describes the traits of early childhood in mimetic expression in terms of the transition from a quasi-natural to a linguistic state. In his essay, '*Zweimal Chaplin*' he writes:

Psychoanalysis attempts to relate the figure of the clown to reactions in the earliest period of childhood prior to the ego having taken a definite shape. Whatever the case, we will certainly learn more about the figure of the clown from children who communicate as mysteriously with the image he creates as they do with animals than we will be searching for a meaning in his actions which are designed precisely to negate meaning. Only if we knew this language shared by clown and children alike, a language which does not aspire to the generation of meaning, would we understand this figure in which nature bids farewell in shock-like fashion.⁹

⁹ *Zweimal Chaplin* in Theodor Adorno *Ohne Leitbild. Parva Aesthetica* (Frankfurt Suhrkamp 1967) p. 90

This is not too far removed from what happens with comedians like Laurel and Hardy, who fail to recognize the feet protruding from underneath the bedspread as their own and, full of fear, start chasing the stranger – not unlike that cat that tries to bite its own tail. Film as a medium seems to be suited in a particular way to the presentation of such physical mimetic expressions – unlike the theatre, which has to resort to enlarged, over-obvious interpretative gestures, to conscious stylization. One might in general therefore consider whether film is not a medium which offers the aesthetic opportunity to objectify modes of experience pertaining to the time prior to 'the ego having taken a definite shape'. In film, the 'movement of images before the inner eye', the 'aspect of reality free of all machinery' (Benjamin) create a smooth symbiotic sense of blending together, of dissolution into images and their movement. Raising one's eyes, changing one's field of vision, the tentative feeling conveyed by a subjective shot, or the feeling of sudden free-fall as an optic sensation, all repeat crucial optical, motor experiences related to those first laborious efforts that every human being makes when learning to walk upright rather than crawl. In this

process, the gaze is directed towards objects which the hand tries to grasp but fails to reach

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno specifies that one of the modern traits of art consisted in the fact that,

The relation between the viewer and work had nothing to do with the incorporation of art by the viewer. On the contrary, the viewer seemed to vanish in the work of art. This holds *a fortiori* for the products of modern art that come at the viewer sometimes like train engines in a film ¹⁰

¹⁰ Theodor Adorno *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1984) p. 19

In happier moments, the mimetic impulse – the compulsion in the culture industry to conform to a false image – becomes the fulfilment of a prelinguistic, non-repressive appropriation and transformation of nature in the enigmatic ‘image’. If, as Josef Fruchtl has shown in his work on Adorno’s concept of mimesis,¹¹ this concept depends on the respective constellations which regulate its switching over from compulsive conformity into playful assimilation, then it is significant that this ambivalent structuring of the concept is not applicable with respect to the *Bilderverbot*. Adorno speaks of such a ban on graven images in terms of its constituting a boundary in human cultural history which we cannot cross back over. This seems surprising not least because at first glance the primacy of the *Bilderverbot* and a stringent interpretation of the concept of mimesis would appear to be mutually exclusive, after all, the ban prohibits precisely that production of likeness on which the mimetic impulse rests. The enigmatic image is, however, that image which does not rely on mirror-like similarity, whereas the culture industry produces images which mirror the second nature of society and thus assert a positive similarity. In this manner, such images contravene the *Bilderverbot* just as positivism violates immanent negation. The origin of the ban is linked to taboos: it stems from a ‘prehistory’, whence mimesis also emanates. In his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno not only binds together mimesis, *Bilderverbot* and taboos into a temporal context, but he also describes their interconnection as indebted to a temporal problem: that of duration and death

¹¹ Joseph Fruchtl *Mimesis: Konstellation eines Zentralbegriffs bei Adorno* (Würzburg 1986)

One of the aspects of art that date back to primeval times is the notion of the duration of the transient. It is a concept that among other things perpetuates the mimetic heritage. Quite a few scholars have stressed the fact that a picture, irrespective of its specific content, is first of all a phenomenon of regeneration.¹²

¹² Adorno *Aesthetic Theory* p. 392

Adorno continues by quoting Frobenius, a cultural anthropologist:

These pictures are attempts to immortalize the animals; they are like eternal stars in the sky.¹³

¹³ *Ibid*

The problem of duration resides precisely in this aspect of

eternalization, which, Adorno suggests, 'in the spirit of the prohibition of graven images [*Bilderverbot*], duration engendered guilt feelings toward the living' Furthermore, the 'reluctance to portray people' stems from magical thought which believes that in the image something of the entity portrayed takes on substantive shape; that, like a voodoo doll the image can strike back at the person depicted The mummy is the first stop on the path of the transformation of the magical fear of the revenge of the dead Referring to research in cultural anthropology, Adorno conceives of mummies as the first sign of the development of an 'idea of aesthetic duration', an attempt to bestow the dead with permanence among the living: 'reification of what was once living' as the 'revolt against death' ¹⁴

14 *Ibid.* p. 393

There is thus an ambiguity at work in the interpretation of the *Bilderverbot* as it is anticipated in 'prehistory', prior to the emergence of Jewish monotheism On the one hand, it leads to magical injury and destruction of the image or some of its parts in order to placate the animistic heritage in it; on the other, it leads, as is evidenced by the following description given by one of the cultural anthropologists Adorno cites, to the depiction's autonomy *vis-à-vis* that which is depicted:

Speiser interprets this shift as a 'transition from the idea of preserving the dead and of simulating their bodily presence to that of merely hinting symbolically at their presence', which marks the transition to the statue ¹⁵

15 *Ibid.*

While Adorno's aesthetics can be joined to a certain variant of the Jewish *Bilderverbot*, one can also find arguments which relate to the beginnings of art in the cult of the dead in Bazin's derivation of a theory of images. In his influential essay, 'The ontology of the photographic image', Bazin starts with the art of mummification which for him is the first form of pictorial art. 'The first Egyptian statue, then, was a mummy, tanned and petrified in sodium'.¹⁶ It is true that Bazin draws diametrically opposed conclusions from the genetic facts of the case since the mummy had to be protected from grave robbers by the company of terracotta statues, the image of man maintained its place as the saving shadow on the way to eternity; the art of the image was created to protect man from destruction by time and death Liberated from 'anthropological utilitarianism', the production of images came in the end to be interested above all in the production of a likeness. 'If the history of the plastic arts is less a matter of their aesthetic than of their psychology then it will be seen to be essentially the story of resemblance, or, if you will, of realism' ¹⁷

16 André Bazin 'The ontology of the photographic image' in *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press 1971) p. 9

17 *Ibid.*, p. 10

Above all, Bazin is interested in an argument which is also taken up by Kracauer, an argument which is connected with the question of whether, in the spirit of phenomenology, there exists such a thing

18 Ibid p 15

as the unmediated contemplation of an object. Bazin, like Kracauer, discovers for film (as previously for photography): 'Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified, as it were'¹⁸ Indeed, this possibility is only permitted by technology, by the subjectification of the lens (*Objektiv*) which can bear witness not only to mere likeness but to the physical presence of the object at a given moment in time.

Only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation, a kind of decal or transfer.¹⁹

19 Ibid p 14

Now it is an intriguing question how far such a revealing 'objectness' which is transmitted by an apparatus can still be brought into relation with the old problem of making images; and, in passing, it is interesting to note that, independently, the Catholic Bazin and the Jewish Kracauer introduce into the same ontological phenomenon a theological idea of salvation which is based on a category of movement in time (*Verzeitlichung*). The exploding of a moment of time, which also plays such an important part in Benjamin's short agenda for a film aesthetics, replaces the problem of reproduction

For simulation, via symbolic intimation, to the autonomy of the depiction, and thus also to the conception in which the images finally converge: the *Bilderverbot* has, since magical prehistory, played the part of the herald of the development of aesthetic autonomy.

If one considers the impact the Jewish *Bilderverbot* has on the history of art, then one finds oneself in similar tangles. Babylon's various oriental mysticisms were still dominated by the clear notion of the presence of the depicted in the depiction. In other words, the image was, given the likeness to God, itself godly – God was substantiated in it: a magical conjuring-up which could only lead to prohibited idolatry, to the forbidden. We therefore read in the Talmud that 'all faces may be portrayed – except the human countenance', and the Zohar concludes from this that 'the human countenance exerts rule over all things'. Exodus 20.4 prohibits images being made of that which 'is in heaven above, or that is in earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth'. Adhering to this ban led in Jewish religious art to various interpretations which all arose in connection with the Book of Genesis and which adjudicate on relations of similarity

If one surveys the debates in art and religious history, then the problem appears quite plausibly to be one which led with a certain intrinsic logic to an ever increasing autonomy of the depiction *vis-à-vis* the depicted.²⁰ In line with gnostic conceptions, where an image of the likeness of God is itself godly, then only images which bore

20 I refer in the following to the results of recent debates presented by Malka Rosenthal. My approach owes much to this essay and the quotations from the Talmud and the Zohar are taken from it. See Malka Rosenthal 'Mach dir kein Bildnis (Ex 20.4) und Im Ebenbild erschaffen (Gen 1.26ff.) Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung der jüdischen Ikonophobie im Mittelalter' Zofia Amersinowa 'Das messianische Gastmahl der Gerechten in einer hebraischen Bibel aus dem 13. Jahrhundert' Ein Beitrag zur eschatologischen Ikonographie bei den Juden in Lieselotte Kotzschke and Peter von der Osten Sacken (eds) *Wenn der Messias kommt: Das jüdisch-christliche Verhältnis im Spiegel mittelalterlicher Kunst* Veröffentlichungen aus dem Institut Kirche und Judentum vol 16 (Berlin 1984)

no likeness could be made: images which would, in other words, be neither of objects in the heavens, nor on earth, nor in the water, and could thus not lead to idolatry. The Babylonian and later the cabbalist gnostics wrestled with the problem of likeness which – once the modernized version of the interpretation of Exodus 20.4 as a ban on graven images of what was on high, that is, of God, had gained the upper hand – was of only marginal significance in the medieval world

The gnostic variant on the *Bilderverbot*, which amounts to a determinate negation in the image of everything which actually exists, is linked in a quite astonishing manner to the aesthetics of modernism. It therefore seems not coincidental that the work of Benjamin and Kafka, in however intricate a fashion, referred to or can be related to cabbalistic figures of thought. I am less concerned here whether, historically speaking, Scholem, Benjamin or Kafka had a knowledge of cabbalist mysticism and Jewish theology which corresponded to the state of research at the time: nor do I wish to relate Critical Theory back to Jewish mysticism. Rather, I wish to show that the idea of a *Bilderverbot* such as is applied by Critical Theory – probably influenced by debates on motifs in Jewish mysticism – produces a regulatory effect when referred back to the concept of mimesis and image theory.

In the *Traumprotokolle* (Protocols of Dreams) in the entry of 12 November, 1955, Adorno commits to paper a so-called 'examination dream' which refers to the ban in a cunning manner. The dreamer is to take his final exams in sociology, specifically in empirical social research. The answers to the questions on empirical techniques and concepts are all wrong. There would also appear to be difficulties with the English. But the Freudian logic of an examination dream is, after all, to curb the fear of the impending examination by remembering earlier exams which one had endured and eventually sat successfully, and the protocol is also structured in terms of such a binary division

Out of pity at my ignorance the examiner declared he would now question me on cultural history. He held up a German passport from 1879. At the back of it I read a parting farewell: 'Now go out into the world with you, little Wolfie!' This motto was formed in gold leaf. I was asked what was special about this. I went into a longwinded exposition on the fact that the use of gold for such purposes dated back to Russian and Byzantine icons. The *Bilderverbot* was taken very seriously in those days: it held true for everything except gold, the purest of metals. Gold then went on to be used in pictorial images on Baroque ceilings, then as inlays on furniture, and the golden writing in the passport was the last vestige of this great tradition. My profound knowledge was greeted with enthusiasm and I had passed the exam.²¹

²¹ Theodor Adorno
Traumprotokolle in *Gesammelte
Schriften* 20.2 (Frankfurt
Suhrkamp 1986) p. 578

We can easily discern within this dream protocol a move from the image to writing via the 'great tradition' of the *Bilderverbot*. Adorno's attempt to rescue the film in aesthetic terms takes a similar course when in the 'Transparencies on film', as I mentioned above, he draws the analogy between the aesthetics of film and writing. To quote it again:

It is in the discontinuity of that movement that the images of the interior monologue resemble the phenomenon of writing: the latter similarly moving before our eyes while fixed in its discrete sign. Such movement of interior images may be to film what the visible world is to painting or the acoustic world to music.²²

²² Adorno 'Transparencies on film'
p. 156

The pictorial image would appear to be the legitimate heir to natural beauty, whose advocate Adorno would dearly like film to be, but only to the extent that it has made itself resemble writing, has taken its leave of a purely depictive function. This notion is again coupled to the idea of the *Bilderverbot* in a lengthier passage in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

The justness of the image is preserved in the faithful pursuit of its prohibition. This pursuit, 'determinate negation' does not receive from the sovereignty of the abstract concept any immunity against corrupting intuition, as does skepticism, to which both true and false are equally vain. Determinate negation rejects the defective ideas of the absolute, the idols, differently than does rigorism, which confronts them with the Idea that they cannot match up to. Dialectic, on the contrary, interprets every image as writing.²³

²³ Adorno and Horkheimer *Dialectic of Enlightenment* p. 24

As I have tried to show, the concept of 'determinate negation' which is formed in the course of the *Bilderverbot* originates in a radicalized version of the ban on graven images presented in the Book of Genesis and binding among gnostic currents. Fragmented figures, such as cherubs that consist only of a head and wings are to be found in the figurative depictions of medieval Jewish art. These are hybrid beings composed of human and animal shapes which abide quite strictly by the ban which prohibits any relation of likeness precisely owing to Creation's likeness to God. They are depictions that in some curious way have carried out the 'determinate negation' of empirical matter without degenerating into iconoclasm. The modernity of these depictions – which point to characteristics which Benjamin not accidentally finds again as the form of allegory in Baroque tragic drama – is closely connected with the prohibition on showing the whole figure, whose perfection would signify a likeness to God: fragmentation, the image as 'unsensuous likeness', successfully generates such mimesis as would be compatible with the *Bilderverbot*.

The developmental line which extends from the taboo on images to the monotheist *Bilderverbot* clearly does not stop short at

theology, but, in the latest stages, in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, is radically secularized, acquiring a dimension that leads to the autonomy of the aesthetic:

... the Old Testament prohibition of graven images (*Bilderverbot*) can be said to have an aesthetic aspect besides the theological one. The interdiction against forming an image – of something – in effect implies the proposition that such an image is impossible to form. Through duplication in art, the appearing quality in nature loses its being-in-itself on which appreciation of nature feeds. Art remains loyal to nature's appearing quality only where it conjures up natural sceneries in the artistic expression of their negativity.²⁴

24 Adorno *Aesthetic Theory* p. 100

Natural beauty in itself, as it is expressed in an image by way of determinate negation, is an allegory of society, and thus itself a cipher of the social domination of nature. There is a passage in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a book which itself inexhaustibly produces images, which sums this up in an image:

The appeal to the sun is idolatry. The sight of the burning tree inspires a vision of the majesty of the day which lights the world without setting fire to it at the same time.²⁵

25 Adorno and Horkheimer *Dialectic of Enlightenment* p. 219

Determinate negation (*bestimmte Negation*) reserves a place for utopia, negation (*Verneinung*) is the precondition for the possibility of difference.

Yet how is an aesthetic theory which derives 'profane revelation' from the determinate negation of the gnostic *Bilderverbot* compatible with the nature of film, which is a means of mechanical reproduction? Are not filmic images always duplications in a quite technical sense, images of something, something which moves in front of the camera? Does not the atavistic fear of being robbed of part of one's person through its capture on film not receive a secular significance here? Are there not characteristics of film which resist the transformation into writing in the sense that Adorno proposed? Are the neofundamentalist Jewish sects not perhaps correct in considering film a violation of the *Bilderverbot*?

The path taken by the culture industry in producing images would seem to lend support to this argument. Technical reproducibility, the illusionistic character of the filmic image which appears to be real, spell danger to the *Bilderverbot*. The diva becomes divine, an idol, a fetish which is part of domination. The separation of arguments about film aesthetics from the analysis of commodity fetishism brings both strands into opposition with each other, steering a course that leads into one of the many antinomies of Critical Theory without, in this instance, sublating that antinomy dialectically. Adorno's proposals for a theory of film which bring him closer to the work of Benjamin, and, in particular, Kracauer, contradict and partly refute

the theses put forward in the chapter on the culture industry. The film aesthetic argument links individual images and montage by way of the regulatory idea of the *Bilderverbot* as the rendering of individual's 'prehistoric' images in writing, images the mimetic qualities of which still contain in unstructured form all the ambiguities of the mythical 'prehistory' and its magical practices. The emphasis placed on this form of rendering images as 'writing' is to be found in the work of avant-garde filmmakers from Eisenstein up to the present. They also were concerned with breaking the fetish character of a cinema of illusions, with enabling the individual image to be freed from an intentional framing in the closed, mythical structure of narrative cinema and with transforming it instead into the intentionless *objet trouvé* so that it becomes 'an aspect of reality free of all machinery' (Benjamin). Theories of montage provide the theoretical foundations for rendering individual images as writing

It is no accident that Alexander Kluge, who himself grew up in the thick of the Critical Theorists' ambivalence towards images, describes his own film aesthetic practice in this context

Kluge: Yes, we will not ease our efforts. These metamorphoses, this simultaneous synchronicity, are a single element. The other epiphany – that is to say, a shot, then a second shot, neither constituting the image – they violate each other by the contrast between them, by their difference or their tautology. And thus a third image emerges which is latent in the cut and is not itself material. The third image is the silent Ideal that has long since existed in the audience.

Koch: Then the third image is the utopia which follows the *Bilderverbot*?

Kluge: In a literal sense, because it does not exist.²⁶

Yet it is not only avant-garde film which adopts such an approach. Ideology critique in film has also been strengthened by feminist film theory. Here, too, the focus is on the concept of the fetish, whereby clear reference is made to Freudian theory with the fetish then being interpreted as a sign of the stubborn strategy of the denial of the female gender, which, in a culture based on patriarchy, falls victim to contempt and repression, thus forming a syndrome. Denying sexual difference under the threat of castration leads precisely to that form of fetish production which the *Bilderverbot* was once levelled against. If the whole of humanity is formed in the image of a single gender, then everything has the similarity of the fetish stamped upon it. To this extent, feminist film theory also rests on considerations which are opposed to the developmental logic which lies behind fetishization and assumptions of identity.

The position in ideology critique taken up by feminist film theory thus leads to similar aporia, but above all to similar aesthetic viewpoints, which – in contesting a narrative cinema determined by

²⁶ Gertrud Koch: Die Funktion des Zerrwinkels in zertrummender Absicht: ein Gespräch mit Alexander Kluge, in: R. Erd et al. (eds): Kritische Theorie und Kultur (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989) p. 116.

the fetish character of patriarchal culture – aligns itself with the avant garde. Critical Theory is evidently still topical in the realms of film and film theory, yet the productive development of a film-theoretical mediation between the extremes of mimesis and *Bilderverbot* has still to be put into practice. In this respect, if we disregard a few beginnings, Critical Theory still offers a programme for film theory and aesthetics which has yet to be achieved.

Based on a translation by Jeremy Gaines. A version of this paper was given at the 1992 Screen Studies Conference and a revised version appears in Gertrud Koch *Die Einstellung ist die Einstellung: Visuelle Konstruktionen des Judentums*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992).

Against negation, for a politics of cultural production: Adorno, aesthetics, the social

GEORGINA BORN

In this paper I look critically at two recent rereadings of Adorno which are interesting because they represent two possible permutations in the current reconsideration of his thought. They are papers by Thomas Y. Levin and John Caughie.¹ Both involve attempts to derive from Adorno's work pointers towards a politics of popular cultural production. This rehabilitation of Adorno appears presently to be ascendant, after the long-established orthodoxy which held him as *bête noir* in view of some of his more reductive and polemical writings on popular culture and, in particular, popular music.² Lest it be thought that this orthodoxy is itself no longer pertinent, it is worth noting that the positions represented by Levin and Caughie coexist with a third tendency evident in some recent work: an almost fundamentalist restatement of the negative excesses of Adornian popular culture critique. Robert Hullot-Kentor, for example, in a classic piece of neo-Adornian cant, reruns some of Adorno's crudest railings against commoditized music and its effects on the listener while ignoring Adorno's own profoundly historicist view of the nature of criticism.³

In the course of the paper it will become clear that my own argument with Levin and Caughie on Adorno is far from a retreat to the classic negative Adornian position on popular culture. Rather, it enables me to develop a critique of Adorno; to propose some ideas on the historical limits and codification of avant-garde techniques; and to sketch out some theoretical coordinates for a politics of

1 Thomas Y. Levin 'For the record: Adorno on music in the age of its technological reproducibility' *October* no. 55 (1990). John Caughie 'Adorno's reproach: repetition, difference and television genre' *Screen* vol. 32 no. 2 (1991) pp. 127–53.

2 For example Theodor Adorno 'On popular music' *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* no. 9 (1941). On the fetish character in music and the regression of listening in A. Arato and E. Gebhardt (eds) *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).

3 Robert Hullot-Kentor 'Popular music and Adorno's: The aging of the new music' *Telos* no. 77 (1988).

popular cultural production, including its psychic dynamics. Ironically, this thinking is heavily indebted to Adorno – probably influenced, despite my better judgement, by negation. Taking Adorno's cue, a key reference throughout the paper in exemplifying theoretical issues will be music as a medium; but in relation to *Caughie*, and in the last section, I discuss the relevance of the ideas for a cultural politics of television.

In the opening and later parts of the paper I offer my own rereading in which I call for a shift in the terms of debate around the politics of cultural production. I argue that Adorno laid the groundwork for this in the implicit ontology of some of his cultural writings. In short, I propose that we follow these writings in developing a composite conception of cultural politics, one which concerns itself as much with the social and institutional mediations of cultural production as with the aesthetic politics of the text; and one which interrogates the relation between these two crucial dimensions. A major weakness of Adorno's thought was his inability to hold on to this composite conception of the cultural object/process, which is at once both a sociological and an aesthetic conception and which engenders combined sociological–aesthetic critique.

I start, then, with the key lacuna in Adorno's thought: the absence of adequate theorization of the social and institutional forms of high culture.⁴ Since this was the sphere in which he was himself enmeshed – as critic, teacher, philosopher, music theorist to the rising generation of the modernist avant garde – this absence suggests the limits of his sociological imagination, and of his reflexivity. The deepest problem in Adorno's project, then, is his ontological inconsistency – the unevenness of the attempt to integrate his aesthetics and sociology of music: although he theorizes how the popular music aesthetic relates to its socio-economic forms, he fails to do the same for his notion of autonomous music. In fact, he defines autonomous music as precisely transcending its sociological base. Adorno's lack of a sociology of art music thus depends on his desire to retain its aestheticized character as an ontological essence, and as transcendent of its sociology. It is only by complementing the analysis of the culture industries with an account of the links between the social relations and institutions of art music and its aesthetic and discursive forms that it becomes possible to work through Adorno's own implicit ontology; and so to analyse the antagonistic interrelations between the two sides – Adorno's 'torn halves' – of contemporary music culture.

The inconsistency matters because it is the ontology implicit in the writings on popular music which is Adorno's most generative legacy for cultural theory, the most productive of a cultural politics. This is because it makes it possible to analyse cultural production as a constellation of simultaneous social, institutional, technological, aesthetic and discursive forms – as a complex, multitextual and

⁴ In one of his few essays which approach the sociology of high culture, Adorno depicts this sphere in terms of a refuge from the ravages of the culture industries. See Theodor Adorno, *Culture and administration* (Telos no. 37 (1978)).

intertextual composite. In this way Adorno points towards a cultural theory which avoids the twin poles of formalism or sociological reduction; and which may allow for the politicization of each or all of the mediations – aesthetic, technological, social, institutional – of cultural production.

I have two further comments. First, and despite its crudeness and the resistances it sets up, Adorno's insistence in his analysis of popular music on standardization, repetition, fetishism and so on as characteristic of both its aesthetic and of its commodity, technological and social forms, and so of the logic of its industrial apparatuses, remains insightful. However – and I will come back to this – it can only be the starting point for an adequate aesthetic analysis of popular music and culture.

Second, in evading the completion of his own project, Adorno's theory is opportunistic, since it is only by exempting art music from sociological scrutiny that he can develop the notion of negation as centrally constitutive of its autonomy, and – most importantly – as the basis of its critique of popular music and so of its critical potential. If Adorno had addressed the sociology of art music in the second half of this century – its administered and subsidized character, its base in the major hegemonic nations, the steady growth of its cultural power, the discursive and institutional means by which the principles of serialism (the central technique of mid-century musical modernism) became hypostatized into a universal method – this would surely have disrupted the parallels on which the theory of negation as both aesthetic *and* sociopolitical critique depends.

But a similar process occurred in relation to the aesthetic. Thus if we trace the aesthetic development of art music after World War II, negation became in serialist modernism increasingly the kind of hyper-rationalist iron cage which Adorno himself had anxiously predicted⁵ and later acknowledged⁶. It generated mirror negations in ever more concentric aesthetic piroettes, while its cultural and institutional power mushroomed. This latter was promoted not a little by the elegant, formalist and scientific rationalism of the discourse, which in turn spawned the new expert disciplines of music theory and analysis.⁷ Rather than critical autonomy, Adorno would have found evidence in this history to justify the theorization of homologies between the aesthetic and the socio-economic in art music as in popular music: a homologous rationalization.⁸ All of this would have drastically undermined his theory of aesthetic negation as the basis of cultural critique. (Let me slip in that I am *not* arguing that there is necessarily a simple homology between the aesthetic, social and institutional mediations in all forms of cultural production.) In short, Adorno can be charged from the contemporary vantage point with having an inadequate theory of power in culture, one which – focusing on the dynamics of

5 Theodor Adorno *The Philosophy of Modern Music* (New York: Seabury Press 1973).

6 Theodor Adorno 'The aging of the new music' *Telos* no. 77 (1988).

7 For an outline of these processes see Georgina Born *Rational Music: IRCAM, Boulez and the Institutionalization of the Avant Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1994) especially chs 2 and 3.

8 Jacques Attali *Noise: the Political Economy of Music* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1985) ch. 4.

capitalism – renders benign the differently hegemonic apparatus of subsidized and administered culture, as a refuge.⁹ This is one reason why his category of negation has continued to be held as such an idealized object in some cultural theory.

What is extraordinary, then, is that the concept of avant-garde negation as critique continues to enjoy such reverence. One favoured way of using it while adapting to the postmodern present has been to read Adorno against the grain: negation is lifted out of its essentially modernist context and applied to popular culture, as though it might hold the key to contemporary critical practice. This is what Caughie tries to do, and I return to discuss it later. First, I want to look at Levin's rather different strategy of rehabilitation.

Technology, inscription, montage: Adorno/Levin's phenomenal redemption of popular music and film

From an archaeology of some of Adorno's lesser known writings on popular music, Levin draws evidence of what he suggests is Adorno's redemptive reading of popular culture: '... a reading of kitsch – and indeed of all mass culture – that is sensitive to both its reified and its utopian dimensions'.¹⁰ Central to this evidence and this reading is Adorno's extended discussion of the gramophone and the 'phonograph record' as dominant music technologies, and in particular his analysis of the materiality of the record as a medium. Levin brings out two main arguments, both of which, he suggests, bear witness to the progressive potential which Adorno perceived in these technologies.

The first concerns the status of the record's grooves, which contain the encoding of the acoustic signals, and which Levin follows Adorno in describing as a 'trace, which is to say, it is a form of inscription that is nevertheless not readily intelligible'.¹¹ Levin stresses again and again that it is the combination of indexicality – the fact that recording technologies are a non-arbitrary means of reproducing musical sound compared with previous forms of written notation – and unintelligibility – the fact that the physical grooves are themselves encrypted, opaque to understanding, enigmatic – which is so central to the progressive character of the medium; and which contrasts with the indexical and over-readily intelligible character of photography as the main technology of visual reproduction. In this way, recording supercedes two relatively arbitrary mediations of music which, it is implied, have come to impede aesthetic development: written systems of musical notation, and the visual and theatrical elements in opera (and, presumably, concert performance). What seems to be at stake here is the idea that recording restores to music its specificity, and autonomy, as an aural phenomenon, at the same time as transforming (commodifying) it

The second argument involves what Levin identifies as Adorno's

10 Thomas Y Levin 'For the record' p. 28

11 *Ibid.* p. 32

notable anticipation of a series of key ideas from Benjamin's famous later essay, 'The work of art in the age of its technical reproduction' Adorno, says Levin, welcomes the release of music by recording from its embeddedness in particular time and place, and so from the spurious longing for performance as the only authentic musical experience; welcomes also the way that the record as commodity can be possessed, repeatedly experienced, so generating familiarity and critical interrogation. But symptomatically, these ideas, which return us to the incipient links between the record as at once technology and commodity form, get less airplay from Levin than the phenomenal: he returns quickly and constantly to Adorno on recording as inscription.

The last section of the essay involves a rather abrupt jump to a section in which Levin links the writings on music to some of Adorno's comments on film. Levin seems partly to want to renovate Adorno's reputation as a critic of film by reference to the writings on music. Yet at the same time he cites a late essay in which Adorno explores the positive potential of radio and sound recording by reference, primarily, to cinematic techniques of editing and montage. This section contains the crux of Levin's reading of Adorno's progressive views on cultural production. It centres on an account of montage technique in film as effecting a '*radically constitutive aesthetic*',¹² a technique which deconstructs the material on which it operates, only to reconstruct it anew. Radio and recording practices, says Levin after Adorno, 'should also stop trying to imitate the concert hall performance and exploit instead the destructive and constructive power of montage in a didactic fashion'.¹³

There are several points which I want to raise. An initial observation concerns Levin's intentions. Does he mean to rehabilitate Adorno, or to offer guidelines, derived from these writings, for a radical cultural practice? He seems to want to do both. Yet it is striking that, in an essay dealing with questions of inscription and mediation, the rhetorical stance taken by Levin is that of a transparent mouthpiece for the unknown (and maligned) Adorno: a stance which makes the essay a scholastic exercise in historical reconstruction more than a consideration of these ideas' relevance for the present. (Henceforth, because it is impossible to separate out Levin's from Adorno's ideas, I will attribute them to the composite figure 'Adorno/Levin'.) Like the essay by Hullot-Kentor, Levin's nonhistoricist approach risks reifying Adorno's thought. A major problem of the piece, then, is its lack of historical sensitivity; whether history in relation to the subject – the possibility of the aging of Adorno's ideas, which Adorno would have seen as inevitable – or the object – to what extent the ideas prove insightful in relation to technological and aesthetic developments since the time of writing.

¹² Ibid. p. 46. *italics in original*

¹³ Ibid.

Such a sensitivity would have raised major doubts about the parallels which Adorno/Levin makes between filmic montage and editing practices in music recording. This in turn invokes two further problems with the perspective. First, the most basic one: the expectation that it is possible to derive from a phenomenal analysis of cultural technologies a sufficient basis for a politicized cultural practice. Such a perspective must assume that there are progressive faculties immanent in the technologies themselves, outside their specific uses. But technologies, despite their immanent characteristics, are only enunciated in particular, historical uses. Moreover they are relatively open and unfixed in these uses: as Callon has argued, the uses of technologies become fixed only as part of a network of human and non-human actors within specific historical contours.¹⁴ In short, it is meaningless to consider technologies themselves in the abstract as a sufficient basis for a cultural politics. This was surely a questionable tendency in Benjamin's writings on the technologies of mass culture: in this sense, Adorno's more pessimistic writings on the intimate and pervasive relations between the mass cultural technologies and the workings of the capitalist culture industries of their day were actually more historically attuned.

The second problem follows. It is that Adorno/Levin's presumption of basic phenomenal parallels between montage/editing (as we will see, the two are not synonymous) in film and in music recording is questionable, and certainly insufficiently demonstrated by reference to the history of dominant techniques in these media. In film, it is arguable that all editing – whether narratively realist or not – involves montage; in that editing constructs a flow in which, subconsciously or not, and whatever the unconscious dynamics, the cuts between shots are perceptible, so that the whole consists of a series of autonomous, identifiable parts. Of course, this technique may be used to more or less illusionist or deconstructive ends, but in all forms of editing, the sutures are finally perceptible. In music recording, by contrast, the dominant practice (and discourse) in both popular and classical music has been relentlessly and successfully illusionist, and in several interesting ways.

Classical music recording has been characterized by a discourse of authenticity belying the technology. Sound engineers and producers have seen their role as 'capturing' the original performance on tape as accurately as possible, to the extent that they have tried to avoid the inevitable transformation of sound quality effected by recording technologies, often by recourse to a naive notion of 'keeping the controls flat'. This marks a crucial historical difference in the technological discourses of classical and popular music. In popular music there has always been an ethos of acceptance, and exploration, of the transformative role of recording technologies on sound colour and quality. However – and this is the problem for

¹⁴ See Michel Callon: 'The sociology of an actor network: the case of the electric vehicle' in M. Callon et al (eds) *Mapping the Dynamics of Science and Technology* (London: Macmillan 1986).

Adorno/Levin – the dominant uses in both classical and popular musics of the *syntagmatic* potential of tape editing have been illusionist, indeed ‘realist’. In both fields, the primary aim of editing has been to splice together different sections of different takes in a way which is *imperceptible* to the listener, so as to arrive at the most perfect rendition of the musical narrative – whether the sound quality is ‘heightened’ or ‘artificial’, or ‘flat’.

The way that editing in music recording constructs the syntagmatic flow is, then, fundamentally different from film. The aim (and achievement) is a text in which the edits are imperceptible – not at the level of dominant narrative conventions, beyond which, visually, the cuts may be noticed; but at the level of physical perception. The degree of illusionism is therefore more profound in sound than in film. It is only rarely, in the instances of avant-garde experimentation with deconstructive devices, that sound editing has adopted the selfconscious awkwardness of montage – deliberately drawing attention to the ‘unnatural’ juxtaposition and contrast of different sources and sounds. Once again, such experimentation has occurred across the divide – in both art and popular musics – with variable political intent, and to variable effect. Interestingly, one of the pioneers of such a technique in art music – Charles Ives – was imagining extraordinary landscapes of musical montage, by writing montage effects into his orchestral pieces, decades before the technologies existed which would make this very easy.¹⁵ Nothing demonstrates better the essential autonomy from technology of such an aesthetic strategy of musical representation.

One of the results of side-stepping the historical in Levin’s piece is to render unproblematic Adorno’s original aesthetic frames of reference. From the present, for example, the essay by Stockhausen which Adorno cites on the progressive potential of electronic music can be grasped as one of the manifestos produced by the dominant figures of the postwar avant garde in the attempt to reinvigorate serialism.¹⁶ There is a complex dynamic behind Adorno’s reference. The journal in which the Stockhausen essay appeared, *Die Reihe*, had recently published a vehement reply to Adorno’s essay ‘The aging of the new music’, in which he in turn had reproached the rigidification of elements of this same serialist avant garde. It seems to me plausible that Adorno was trying, in some of his thinking, to effect a rapprochement by finding an aspect of current avant-garde developments that he could condone, and that he found it in the technological discourse of renewal characteristic of this period of electronic music, as enunciated by Stockhausen. However, it is not clear that the aesthetic of electronic music, nor that of its recent descendant, computer music, bear any necessary relation to notions of sound montage. Simply because, as Stockhausen describes at length, ‘new’ sounds must technically be built up out of their micro-components from scratch in electronic and computer music, this

15 A wonderful example is Ives’s
Decoration Day (1912)

16 Karlheinz Stockhausen
Electronic and instrumental
music *Die Reihe* no. 5 (1959)

17 Ironically it was the French school of *musique concrète* the other main lineage in early electronic music to the German *Elektronische Musik* with which Stockhausen was associated that centred from the start on montage effects produced by the physical manipulation of tape. But in battles within the field *musique concrète* always had lower status than its more intellectually and technologically ambitious German counterpart: it was seen as debased precisely because of its empiricist work method.

18 Karlheinz Stockhausen 'To the International Music Council *Perspectives of New Music* vol 24 no 1 (1985)

19 For a discussion of the status of high level contemporary music technologies – computer music, software programmes which inscribe rules of musical structure and 'knowledge' – and how they constrain creative practice, see Born *Rational Music* chs 7, 8 and 11.

does not mean that the way they are used becomes a montage effect.¹⁷ Sounds of this kind can be – and often are – used as elements in continuous musical narratives of a far from 'deconstructive' kind. So Adorno/(Levin) mistakes Stockhausen's mention of montage as a technical operation for the final aesthetic effect. Many would argue that Stockhausen and others failed in their attempt to reinvigorate the serialist aesthetic by turning to new electronic means. Certainly, with hindsight, I would contest the view that the direction taken in the essay proved progressive either aesthetically or in wider cultural political terms. Stockhausen, incidentally, remains committed to a discourse which poses autonomous New Music against the degraded products of the music industries – 'muzak', 'junk music', 'mass music', and so on.¹⁸

All of this raises a third problem. In Levin's essay, the phenomenal characteristics of the particular technologies at issue are read as tantamount to an aesthetic: the phenomenal is taken to promise an innovative aesthetic, if used appropriately, as informed by the theory of the radical potential of inscription and montage. But technologies themselves do not amount to an aesthetic: they may be amenable to, or favour, particular aesthetic uses, or they may be aesthetically open and polysemic. Technologies vary in this respect, and this in itself must be theorized. For example, music technologies which are limited to producing specific timbral palettes, while aesthetically imbued, are more aesthetically open than higher level technologies in which are inscribed rules of musical (harmonic, melodic, rhythmic or formal) structure.¹⁹ Sound recording technologies, as I have argued, are themselves amenable to both 'realist' and montage ('deconstructive') uses, neither of which are aesthetically specific. Both have occurred in a range of twentieth-century musics. And from the present, it is hard to see the justification for granting a specially radical status to montage uses, uninformed by an analysis of other cultural political intent guiding them.

Finally, an issue arises to which I will refer again: that is, the fact that montage techniques in music (like similar avant-garde effects in film) now have a considerable history, across several different musical fields and genres. There is no way of using such techniques 'innocently' or as if new: listeners accustomed to these genres will recognize (various) montage effects. In other words, along with other major techniques deriving from the historical avant-garde they are now highly codified. It would be impossible, then, for montage to evade its own historicity. Once again, what is at stake are the specific aesthetic and political uses which have been, or may be, made of montage, rather than the phenomenal/technological bearer of the technique.

While I agree on the benefits of examining the materiality of particular media and how this may set the limits to aesthetic or

²⁰ Levin's earlier article 'The acoustic dimension' (*Screen* vol 25 no 3 [1984]) is exemplary in its careful dissection of the materiality of the soundtrack by contrast with the moving image and of its ideological propensities

indeed cultural political possibilities,²⁰ my point is that the technological/phenomenal cannot stand in for an aesthetic politics, let alone for a politics of cultural production. I would go as far as to say that in the attempt to concur with Adorno on this, Levin is abetting what amounts to Adorno's evasion, via a detour into technology, of an engagement specifically with the aesthetics and politics of popular culture.

The limits of negation: Caughie on aesthetic politics in mainstream television

I now turn to the second approach to reworking Adorno, the issue of avant-garde negation as critique and Caughie's attempt to apply this to popular culture. His essay develops a theory of difference in aesthetic strategies in television production; and then proposes this theory as the basis of an aesthetic politics of television. This is a welcome development, which he rightly frames against a lack of theorization of the aesthetic politics of production in recent television studies. But while valuing the paper, I want to question both of his moves. In terms of the analysis of aesthetic difference in popular culture, Caughie's basic point is that we should look again at the Adornian distinction between difference as negation – 'a difference . . . in which something is at stake'²¹ – and which, he suggests, is the key to both aesthetic and political value; and the kind of difference to which it stands opposed, an 'in-different' repetition or variation which, he implies, characterizes much television (and genre production) just as Adorno saw it as characteristic of the culture industries. Caughie derives from this a theory, influenced by Linda Hutcheon²², in which parody becomes the latest form taken by negation in recent high quality, progressive American television.

A first observation is that, as with montage, and as Caughie himself admits,²³ negation always rapidly itself becomes a form of repetition and variation – of previously codified aesthetic negations as they exist in relation to particular genres. This logic is always a problem for attempts to produce 'structural' readings of avant-garde negation, as though these strategies could somehow themselves evade the identification of genre, their own historicity.²⁴ Thus parody itself becomes standard (and invites the parody of parody?). In this important sense, then, Caughie's distinction (like Adorno's) is problematic.

My second comment is that negation – even as reworked into parody – does not help to analyse the key aesthetic processes of popular cultural production. The subtle transformations involved in successful genre production are dismissed in the Adornian perspective as regressive or illusory. Similarly, Caughie's dismissal of

²¹ Caughie 'Adorno's reproach' p 132

²² Linda Hutcheon *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms* (London: Methuen 1985)

²³ Caughie 'Adorno's reproach' p 152

²⁴ See also Georgina Born 'On modern music culture: shock pop and synthesis' *New Formations* no 2 (1987) pp 66–70

the 'in-difference' of repetition or variation jettisons, at one stroke, probably the hardest questions posed by the powerful psychic attractions of televisual and popular musical genre production. That is, how desire is constantly stoked by those products (by no means all) which *are* primarily variations, and yet which somehow, imperceptibly, recreate or *prolong the life of* the 'original' seductions of the genre (The closest I can come to describing this is the feeling some of the best mainstream pop evokes that one is absolutely sure one has heard this song before, because the sound is 'exactly right', has anticipated perfectly, as it were, the 'only possible solution' to the projected temporal unfolding of the genre)

The disagreement can be illustrated by contrasting Caughie's and my own reading of his examples of successful aesthetic politics: shows such as *Hill Street Blues* (1980–9), *St Elsewhere* (1982–8) and *thirtysomething* (1987–92), which he sees as parodies involving 'repetition with difference' ²⁵ But in my view these are texts in which reference to extant genres is an extremely powerful element of the structure of desire; and in which innovative variation is as important as any attempted parodic difference. (It is also interesting to consider Caughie's analysis in relation to Todd Gitlin's account of the intentions behind *Hill Street Blues*.²⁶ Rather than conscious parody, the producers and director described a key influence as their own contact with art film, low budget and *verité* production techniques, and saw this as resulting not in parody but in a heightened stylistic 'realism'. What status the producers' own exegesis?)

The mystery of repetitive genre productions, then, is not so much how they may be radically transformed (by irony, parody, satire), but how they miraculously continue to be seductive, and to innovate while remaining firmly within existing rules, for so long. In my view the concept of negation comes nowhere near helping to theorize the far more complex, subtle and differentiated forms of difference inherent in popular cultural production; so that, despite insights, Caughie fails in his initial task – elucidating the role of difference in these aesthetic processes. He also risks underestimating both the reflexivity and the creativity inherent in innovative genre production.

But if this is so, then another of Caughie's central aims is undermined: if negation is the point of conversion between aesthetic and political value, and if negation cannot help to theorize the aesthetic, then its political role must also be in doubt. In fact by defining the politics of the aesthetic in terms of negation as opposed to variation, Caughie announces his intention of elevating political over aesthetic value. I would go in exactly the opposite direction. It seems to me that before we can even begin to develop an aesthetic politics of cultural production, we require first a subtler and wider account of the aesthetic in terms of the production of meaning by different cultural forms, and also by their social, discursive and

²⁵ Caughie *Adorno's reproach*
p. 150

²⁶ Todd Gitlin *Inside Prime Time*
(New York: Pantheon, 1983)

institutional mediations. In other words, a better understanding of the cultural object – as a complex constellation of mediations – must precede, provide the basis for, political analysis. For example, in analysing the politics of pop music production, it is necessary to examine how this may inhere in its various mediations – technological, social, institutional – which, I am suggesting, constitute the cultural-political object as much as the ‘music itself’²⁷

However there is a more radical implication of my questioning of the legacy of avant-garde aesthetic politics as revisited by Caughie. That is, I am also asking whether it is not appropriate at certain points to treat the aesthetic as autonomous from the political; whether understanding aesthetic processes is not sometimes more necessary than searching for political value in the aesthetic. Thus while the aesthetic may be politicized, it may not be in other cases other dimensions of the cultural object may be politicized (the social, the institutional) without the aesthetic so being. And even when the aesthetic is politicized, this does not mean that it can be reduced to its political motivation. To recognize and allow for these phenomena, entailing a multiple conception of the cultural object, does not mean giving up on cultural politics; but it does allow for comprehending the specificity of the aesthetic.

Caughie’s scheme of difference thus shows the strains of following the Adornian legacy in several ways. First, by giving insufficient weight to the potential politicization of the social and institutional mediations of cultural production, and so requiring of the aesthetic that it must necessarily be *the* site of the political in culture. Second, and therefore, by searching for signs of the political in the aesthetic, and by reducing this to the political-read-as-negation irrespective of the more complex and varied processes of differentiation characteristic of popular cultural aesthetics. In brief, Caughie risks reducing the politics of television production to negational aesthetic strategies alone, thereby neglecting to consider the politics of the institutions and social relations within which cultural producers operate and aesthetic decisions are made.

Significantly, another recent study takes almost the opposite approach. In his book *Outside Literature*, Tony Bennett rejects all formalist and avant-garde theories of cultural politics through his critique of Marxist models predicated on the dualism of internal object (aesthetic) and external conditions (history analysed in the terms of historical materialism).²⁸ On the one hand, Bennett argues, aesthetic discourse has served historically to constitute a cultural object which is conceived as separate from, and transcendent of, its institutional and social forms – a mystification which has in itself served cultural domination.²⁹ On the other hand, aesthetics has been seen as a functionary of broader political forces (raising class consciousness, critiquing ideology), so that Marxist critics have seen their aim as speculation on the correct aesthetic strategies that

²⁷ For a marvellous account taking this approach of the cultural politics of punk rock see Dave Laing *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press 1985)

²⁸ Tony Bennett *Outside Literature* (London: Routledge 1990)

²⁹ This is close to Pierre Bourdieu *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul 1986)

would most advance these (external) functions. Bennett calls instead for a cultural politics which would site itself 'inside' the institutions of literature and which – by attending to the particular kinds of sociality and practice, classification and legitimation which these enjoin – would be able strategically to inform cultural policy.

While I agree with the overall direction of the critique, Bennett may go too far in displacing the aesthetic as a site of the political in culture. That is, even if insufficient in itself, and despite the dangers of fetishization, the aesthetic must *also* be rejoined as part of a politics of cultural production. Bennett himself proposes a Brechtian solution: a provisional conception of the aesthetic concerned with 'political use-value',³⁰ which avoids the universalizing, ethical and idealized character of historical aesthetics. But while I applaud much of this, it continues to marginalize the ways that cultural producers must deal with issues of form, meaning, pleasure and displeasure which are specific to a particular medium, which are telling in terms of their relations with an audience, and which cannot ultimately be reduced to a politics of the social or institutional.

Cultural production as a composite of mediations, and as an imaginary strategy

I can now begin to outline a different conception of the politics of cultural production; and the point is that it depends on an adequate conceptualization of cultural production itself. This has been impeded in recent cultural and media studies, due to two related forces: on the one hand the overwhelming obsession with consumption; and on the other, the vogue in structuralist and poststructuralist critiques of authorship which have bequeathed a legacy of such doubt that it has inhibited the theorization both of authorship and of production. It is as if the only legitimate site of realization of a cultural politics has been 'effects' on an audience (themselves notoriously unspecifiable), rather than there being a place to examine and theorize the strategies and intentions – aesthetic, ideological, institutional – of producers, even if the results of such strategies are, finally, enabling rather than determinant.³¹ There has thus been a telescoping of the communications process whereby it is assumed that, unless producers' strategies are vindicated by palpable political results in an audience, they are not worth bothering with. This effectively marginalizes the main arenas in which all professional or proto-professional cultural workers have first to engage: the institutional field which confronts them in attempting to work, and the practical politics of this engagement.

Nothing has fixed our minds better on authorship than the recent controversies around figures such as Salman Rushdie and the artists Richard Serra and Robert Mapplethorpe.³² From these cases – and

³⁰ Bennett *Outside Literature*
p. 166

³¹ Ien Ang takes the position I am criticizing here in her polemical attack on one institutionalized instance of 'a productivist view of progressive television'. See 'The vicissitudes of progressive television' *New Formations* no. 2 (1987) p. 102.

³² On the Richard Serra case see C. Weyergraf-Serra and M. Baskirk (eds), *The Destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents* (London: MIT Press, 1991). On issues arising from the Robert Mapplethorpe controversy see Robert Hughes, 'Art, morals and politics' *New York Review of Books* 23 April 1992.

against the reduction of the author to a nostalgic trope standing for an illusory point of origination, a means of legitimation, or an authoritarian fixer of meaning – I would assert two principles. First, that the political position of the author is not foreclosed. Second, that cultural works are produced not through some kind of monadic ‘auto-reproduction’ or intertextual ‘auto-transformation’ of existing generic and discursive forms; nor through some illusorily transparent, circular psychic or market movement by which producers simply read off and implement the ‘needs’ and ‘desires’ of consumers, but through the conditioned interaction of originating subjects with extant forms and, in some cases, extant audiences. I am calling, then, for a return of agency in theorizing cultural production, and for acknowledgement of the place of originating creativity or, simply, work. At the same time, in speaking again of the author it will be crucial to employ the productive research – both empirical and theoretical – which has been done in the name of poststructuralist critique to complexify our conception of authorship; in particular, its embeddedness in extensive divisions of labour and its varying functions within specific discursive, aesthetic and institutional regimes.³³

Thus an overriding task is for greater clarity in conceptualizing the different levels, moments and forms in any potential process of cultural production, so as to account for both the commonality and the differentiation of cultural production. Such a conceptualization would have to take account of cultural production as a complex labour process and division of labour, as informal and amateur, or formal and professional; and as conditioned by economic forces, legal and political regulation, and also by the history of institutional forms specific to each cultural sector. But cultural production also needs to be understood as involving imaginative and aesthetic constructions, projected connections both to imagined social communities, and to aesthetic genres which themselves have histories. Cultural production, then, is a composite of discursive, technological and social mediations, its labour process enjoining both social and imaginative processes moving between more and less individuated or socialized phases. Cultural production, in other words, needs to be thought at once in its imaginary, social and aesthetic dimensions. It is this constellatory, composite conception which returns us to Adorno’s ontology; and only in this way is it possible to grasp for any specific cultural production how these different moments and forms may come, in various ways, to be politicized. Music shows this particularly well in that its extraordinary potential as a political medium can be related directly to the proximity of its many social, technological and discursive mediations, which derive in turn from its sonic, abstract and performative phenomenal character.³⁴

I want to add a further layer of speculation here: about strategies

³³ Colin McCabe seems to be making a similar proposal in his digression on authorship in Isaac Julien and Colin McCabe *Diary of a Young Soul Rebel* (London: British Film Institute 1991) pp. 46–9.

³⁴ See Georgina Born ‘Music, modernism and signification’ in A. Benjamin and P. Osborne (eds) *Thinking Art Beyond Traditional Aesthetics* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts 1991) and Antoine Hennion *La Médiation Musicale* (Paris: Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales: Thèse de Nouveau Régime 1991).

of cultural production, and the subjectivities which they enjoy. In my view, we require both a developed concept of agency in cultural production, and an understanding of the structures within which such agents operate. I offer these ideas because they address, structurally, a level often ignored – the psychic and imaginary dynamics of creativity. Simply, I want to think speculatively about how cultural producers place themselves and why, and about how *aesthetic and institutional self-placing relates to the courting or construction of socio-cultural identities*. I want to think about ‘imagined communities’ in relation to the politics of cultural production – the projection of socio-cultural positioning through strategies of production. Although I cannot answer these questions here, I want to ask: what kind of ‘community’ do aesthetic strategies articulate? And if this is aesthetically produced, what social meaning or political effectivity does it have?

As I have suggested, strategies of cultural production imagine (or construct) at once aesthetic, social and institutional positions. In short, one can discern two fundamental, potential forms of imagining at play in each of these levels of cultural production. These are, on the one hand, a strategy which constructs alterity, difference, marginality, the small scale, the ‘local’, the ‘independent’, the ‘avant garde’, and on the other a strategy which seeks fusion and merging, submersion into the dominant collectivity, which constructs the mainstream, the ‘global’, the communal and consensual. They therefore form two ends of a spectrum ranging from the courting of (various kinds of) difference to the desire for merging, massification, internationalization.

The point is that both strategies involve basic structures of identification and of the constitution of (individual or collective) self *through cultural production*. Both produce different kinds of psychic states, of pleasure and prestige, of *culturally imagined community*³⁵ – for producers, but also potentially for their consumers who are invited to enter into complicit imaginary identification with the producers. The global strategy invokes the pleasure of overcoming boundaries, of an idealized ultimate reconciliation, of the reflected narcissism of seeing self and other as ‘becoming one’; and at the same time the darker phantasized pleasures of omnipotence, of banishing difference, of bringing everyone else tyrannically under one’s own regime. The strategy of alterity enjoys the sense of constituting difference, of defining the (collective) self against others, the small and hard-to-find as opposed to the widely available, the exotic or complex as opposed to the banal – and this without any necessary antagonism. Yet this too carries its darker side: defensive phantasies of fragmentation, of the destruction of the ‘unity’, and the splitting involved in denigrating the ordinary and dominant while self-idealizing the different.³⁶ What I am trying to get at are the kinds of imaginary and psychic investments which are

³⁵ For a discussion of the agency of cultural intellectuals and institutions in the constitution of collective social identities – but focused here in relation to questions of national identity – see Philip Schlesinger *Media, State and Nation* (London: Sage 1991) ch. 8.

³⁶ I draw on a Kleinian psychoanalytic framework for these ideas. See Melanie Klein *Envy and Gratitude* (New York: Delta 1977). On recent developments in Kleinian (clinical) theory – see Elizabeth Bott Spillius (ed.) *Melanie Klein Today* (London: Routledge 1988).

immanent in cultural producers' aesthetic and institutional self-placing; which form part of the conscious agency of authors, but which are also psychically imbued and unconsciously at play; and which are irreducible to – and may be in tension with – cruder instrumental calculations such as the economic rewards of mainstream commercial success, or the cultural capital attending avant-garde status.³⁷

These ideas bring us back to the problem of negation. Now if negation was unhelpful in understanding popular cultural aesthetics, it is also unhelpful in examining the social and institutional dimensions of cultural production, since these are constituted as much through positive as through negational imaginings of difference. My use of 'alterity' to describe strategies of difference implies a *positivity*, difference without any necessary antagonism, another form of positively constitutive imaginary identity to that of merging with the mainstream. The social and institutional 'genres' of cultural production, then, may sometimes, or may partly, be structured by opposition.³⁸ But this does not in itself guarantee political value, and these social forms of cultural production are also positively imagined, elected, and transformed (through variation)

On this question, in relation to music, most politicized rock has been produced out of petty capitalist enterprises – some of them intentionally negating aspects of the major industrial institutions, some not at all – or out of hybrid part-subsidized operations, while many small-scale, experimental art music groups operate in the margins of the subsidized high arts. Both, then, derive from positions of institutional alterity which appear to allow for a degree of reflexive disengagement from the aesthetic and/or political priorities of the mainstream. However this is not a causal relation: institutional alterity does not produce aesthetic difference or political dissent, just as inhabiting the institutional mainstream does not preclude them, even if it does favour the reproduction of aesthetic and ideological dominants. Overall, aesthetic choice will tend to imply a certain institutional placing; just as the desire to construct a certain social imaginary through music – to produce a music, say, which would cohere a particular alliance of subcultures – will imply a set of aesthetic (and institutional) choices. Yet the effectivity (or 'success') of these aesthetic choices, and the crystallization of this musically imagined community, are not assured.

Regarding the global imaginary: this has, for cultural producers, seductive psychic aspects both aesthetically and socially. Aesthetically, because of the pleasures and the skills involved in 'hitting upon' the next transformation of extant mainstream genres. Socially, because of the pleasures – derived from the phantasy in play – of aligning around a cultural product a vast, diverse and unknowable international community of connoisseur-fans: a phantasy of social and cultural power which is at once both utopian

³⁷ The ideas in this section may appear to echo the recent discourse of the global and local within cultural studies. Yet if there is an echo, my intention is to supplement that approach by addressing some of the many questions it raises without answering about how these cultures and the identities they bring forth and entail are themselves constituted. See Janet Wolff 'The global and the specific: reconciling conflicting theories of culture' in Anthony D. King (ed.) *Culture, Globalization and the World System* (London: Macmillan 1991).

³⁸ In analysing publishing as a field of cultural production, for example, Bourdieu portrays its institutional forms as structured by a series of negations/oppositions. See Pierre Bourdieu 'The production of belief' *Media Culture and Society* vol. 2 no. 3 (1981).

and omnipotent. The point is that any of these may be at work in motivating the desire for global cultural reach. These psychic dimensions of production require to be theorized, and to take their place as part of the broader scheme of forces and conditions. In short, neglecting these internal yet very real components of the psychic investment of producers risks reducing cultural production to a set of banal economic and institutional forces; and what these are *animated by* psychically and imaginatively – the self-positioning of authors within basic contours such as those I have provisionally sketched – is left unaccounted for. Thus a global social imaginary which is at once *both* utopian *and* tyrannically omnipotent comes to be read as either/or, and is yoked unproblematically to a far more straightforward institutional technology of market maximization as though it was simply mimetic. Thus, also, the possibility of authors becoming more aware of the way their own psychic investments drive their own agency, and of how these might therefore connect with such a technology, is obscured.

Recent terms of debate on the cultural politics of television

I want in this final section to revisit the cultural politics of television, by looking briefly at some recent work in relation to the ideas I have sketched.

William Boddy focuses his analysis of alternative television in the USA on a discussion of Paper Tiger Television: a production collective operating in public access cable TV in Manhattan.³⁹ From his account, Paper Tiger exemplifies an experiment animated both by an aesthetic/formal politics (Boddy writes of the programmes' 'strikingly unconventional' and 'eccentric' visual style)⁴⁰, and also, in its institutional placing and loose and amateur collective structure, by a politics of institutional form and of the social relations of cultural work. Moreover all of this rests on the collective's pronouncement of an Ur-political-economic critique of the corporate structures of the North American media industry. Boddy shows how interrelated these are, in that collectivism, the resource constraints of public access, and the critique of dominant televisual forms converge in making it undesirable and impossible to emulate the aesthetic and ideological norms of North American television. The overall effect is anti-realist: 'at its best ... a didactic television both Brechtian and carnivalesque'.⁴¹

Thus institutional alterity is here paralleled by aesthetic and ideological difference; and each mediation is driven by negation of mainstream forms. But as Boddy makes clear, Paper Tiger programmes are untypical of most public access television; so that in this sector, institutional alterity is quite compatible with the pursuit of conventional production values. In this sense, Paper Tiger's

³⁹ William Boddy 'Alternative television in the United States' *Screen* vol. 31 no. 1 (1990)

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 99

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 100

particular strategy is far from an automatic result of its conditions and represents a conscious and informed politics, with roots in an international culture of radical media theory. At the same time Boddy hints at a psychic dynamic animating Paper Tiger in which all commercial television is denigrated and seen as irredeemably collusive with the dominant structures of power, while the 'alternative' grants itself a messianic role.

More troubled is the case of the erstwhile independent television Workshop sector working to Britain's Channel Four. In their recent highly charged exchange on the Workshops and their legacy, Alan Lovell, a Workshop member, and Rod Stoneman, a commissioning editor for Channel Four,⁴² agree on one central issue. That is, the sector's lack of aesthetic successes, and in particular its inability to rejuvenate or to use generatively for television a deconstructive aesthetic politics deriving from 1970s avant-garde film.⁴³ Stoneman gives a nuanced account of the sector's contradictory institutional and aesthetic histories. He charts the pressures pulling the Workshops towards 'dominant modes of representation'⁴⁴ culminating, in the late 1980s, in the shift to magazine formats as part of a 'populist compromise';⁴⁵ while institutionally the sector was recomposed as a profusion of competitive small businesses – a tendency which he rightly sees as present from the start. Thus implicitly, he closes the door on the Workshop era.

In a discussion of independent television in Britain and Europe, Robins and Cornford advance a bleak empirical case for an overriding tendency in the independent sector towards concentration,⁴⁶ and examine how such economic and institutional changes affect aesthetic and programming possibilities. At the end of their paper, reminiscent of Murdock and Golding's classic analysis,⁴⁷ and criticizing the chorus of voices from right (such as the neo-liberals) and left (such as the theorists of post-Fordism) who have taken the existence of independent production to promise cultural diversity and innovation, they argue that processes of conglomeration and concentration bring inevitable pressures for low-cost, high-audience programmes, that in film as in television, 'the survival of independents depends on their ability to mimic the output of the majors'.⁴⁸ In this argument, then, economic and institutional logics are seen as determinant of aesthetic/textual strategies.

We can now draw out how these accounts relate to my earlier arguments. First, it is striking that all of them interrogate *both* the aesthetic and the institutional: all are concerned with exploring the viability and the cultural politics of spaces of institutional alterity within television production, and the relation between this institutional placing and aesthetic/textual strategies. This is an advance on the primarily textual focus of debates over progressive television in the 1970s and early 1980s.

⁴² Alan Lovell 'That was the Workshops that was' *Screen* vol. 31 no. 1 (1990). Rod Stoneman 'Sins of commission' *Screen* vol. 33 no. 2 (1992) pp. 127–44.

⁴³ Isaac Julien has contested Lovell's critique of 1970s aesthetics as reworked by Black Workshops such as Sankofa and Black Audio. (See Julien and MacCabe *Diary of a Young Soul Rebel* pp. 64–7). Indeed Lovell's assessment of their work seems ambiguous. Many would argue that of all the Workshops it was these that have most fruitfully and consistently developed the issues posed by 1970s aesthetic politics.

⁴⁴ Stoneman 'Sins of commission' p. 139.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 141.

⁴⁶ Kevin Robins and James Cornford, 'What is "flexible" about independent producers?' *Screen* vol. 33 no. 2 (1992).

⁴⁷ Graham Murdock and Peter Golding 'Capitalism, communication and class relations' in J. Curran et al. (eds) *Mass Communication and Society* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977).

⁴⁸ Robins and Cornford 'What is "flexible" about independent producers?' p. 200.

Second, it seems that institutional alterity (whether in US public cable or British independent production) may support either alternative/progressive or global/mainstream aesthetic forms: there is no simple causality. Being an independent is compatible with various ideological and aesthetic positions. 'Independent production' in the cultural industries, as Robins and Cornford imply, and whether aided by subsidy or not, equals dependent and insecure petty capitalist cultural production. Across the different media, this sector has often sustained innovative work, but this is always in tension with what Robins and Cornford stress as independents' primary difficulty – economic survival. These are, then, issues requiring historically attuned empirical research.

Third, and following, at stake in the debate on British independent television are different views on the relation between the economic, institutional and aesthetic mediations of this sphere of cultural production. Both Robins and Cornford, and Stoneman, argue that economic forces encourage increasing concentration amongst the independents, and that this is *accompanied by* a shift towards dominant televisual forms and by a decline in cultural diversity (for Robins and Cornford) or challenging work (for Stoneman). But unlike Robins and Cornford, Stoneman does not describe this shift as an *effect* of economic integration. Rather, in charting the process whereby the Workshops and left independents became increasingly disillusioned with the 1970s legacy of aesthetic politics and turned to learning from dominant forms, Stoneman grants a certain autonomy to aesthetic discourse and its historical transformations. Robins and Cornford thus neglect evidence of an *aesthetic crisis in the independent sector which was autonomous* from economic and institutional changes; and which has also driven independent producers towards an interest in mainstream televisual forms.

Further, their argument might be taken to imply that the only reason independents would take up mainstream forms would be under economic pressure – reluctantly or cynically – in pursuit of ratings. But this ignores a shift in desire: from the primary pursuit of an avant-garde aesthetic to that of the global, the dominant. That is, Robins and Cornford underestimate the combined *pull* for cultural producers of the seductions of mainstream reach – of the attractions of trying to understand and become skilful at commercially successful forms – with the attendant psychic investments which I earlier analysed, but also the *push* of the disillusion with aspects of avant-garde aesthetic discourse, along with, perhaps, a fatigue with its own attendant psychic configuration.

By contrast with both Boddy and Stoneman, then, Robins and Cornford lack a conceptual space for the specific history of aesthetic debate and practice within the independent sector, for the autonomous temporal dynamics of aesthetic discourse. In this they

also neglect the psychic and imaginary dynamics of creativity as they interact with this history. And in all of this, they tend also to collapse agency into structure. Given that they are correct in their analysis of the economic logics at work, and although these may act as constraints on the frameworks within which agents may operate, these logics can never be completely determinant of the varied reactions of cultural producers; and especially of the aesthetic strategies adopted, which are likely to be equally conditioned by the history of aesthetic forms appropriate to a given institutional space, and by agents' capacity for innovation within such a space.

Political and regulatory factors will play no small part in determining what kind of institutional scene and structure of subsidy survive the inexorable logics described by Robins and Cornford. To what extent, for example, might the kind of alternative space opened up in the USA by the diffusion of cable⁴⁹ translate into British or European terms; what are the future possibilities for decentralized audiovisual industries as part of local government strategies for regional industrial regeneration?⁵⁰ If we accept their pessimistic scenario, perhaps it is more understandable that Caughie appropriate place to look now for a cultural politics of television as at the level of the aesthetic, and, specifically, the aesthetic innovations of mainstream North American television. Yet for all the interest of his analysis, it seems to me that his is a position suspended across a chasm both of aesthetic uncertainty and of institutional reconfiguration, and that, in common with Robins and Cornford, it risks yielding all ground in terms of attempting to theorize positively the possibility of renewal of the social and institutional mediations of cultural production: of what institutional spaces might be opened up, under what conditions; the social bases and relations which might characterize them; and the aesthetic strategies which they might enable.

Coda

I have stressed the need for an analysis of cultural production which takes account both of structure (including psychic structures) and agency; and of aesthetic and institutional mediations. Without providing a 'total' alternative, I have noted some problems with extant perspectives. Adorno's ontology and aesthetic lack three essential, and related, dimensions: a sense of the potential autonomy – even in popular cultural production – of the aesthetic from the economic and institutional, the importance of examining empirically how these basic mediations are articulated, and the necessity of tracking the history of aesthetic discourse specific to a cultural field, an appreciation, and mode of analysis, of aesthetic innovation in popular culture, and a place for agency. Murdock and Golding long

- ⁴⁹ According to Boddy, it was a fortuitous combination of technological form and political circumstance which enabled US local governments to require a quota of noncommercial public access channels as a condition of cable franchises.
- ⁵⁰ Robins and Cornford ('What is flexible about independent producers?' pp. 197–9) question altogether the viability of regionalist independent production, arguing that it is beset by contradictions and noting the continuing tendency towards centralization in London. Interestingly, in an earlier article Robins took the opposite view, charting what he identified as the healthy growth of regional image industries within Britain ('Robins: Reimagined Communities? European image spaces beyond Fordism', *Cultural Studies* vol. 3, no. 2 [1989]).

ago criticized the absence of agency in Adorno's theories.⁵¹ Despite this, in my view their own political economy of media, while more elaborated and empirically informed, has tended to economic determinism; and these traces can also be seen in recent work such as Robins and Cornford's. These are not simply intellectual issues – although these are certainly important, given the widespread influence within recent social theory of critical neo-Weberian and Foucauldian ideas which grant a greater autonomy than Marxism to cultural, political and discursive processes. They are also political issues; since only with an adequate account of agency, and of strategies of aesthetic and institutional self-placing, will academic analyses of these processes come to be meaningful to cultural producers themselves, and so facilitate that dialogue in which theory may inform practice and vice versa.

Another theme of my argument has been that Adornian theories of negation have little to offer the aesthetics or politics of popular culture. They have been called on because of a misreading of their status as offering a transhistorical or synchronic, structural technique of critique or estrangement applicable to popular forms, rather than as embedded in the specific historical discourse of modernism. Of course this kind of perspective is not new, and accords precisely with the questioning of avant-garde experiments in mass cultural forms from the turn of the 1980s on – whether in the move to standard television formats in left independent television, the return to narrative in some art film, or the return to glossy images and polished production techniques in new pop after punk.⁵²

But I end by questioning my own conclusions. Is it that avant-garde techniques are utterly antithetical to popular forms? Or is it that they have not been well enough integrated or applied? Sometimes now, when I listen again to avant-garde rock from the late 1970s in the context of current pop, it appears suddenly more precious and inventive than ever it used to.⁵³ Is this because, with the increasingly concentrated and centralized industries producing ever more retro and standard formats, and the dizzy speed of innovation in dance musics tending finally to flatten into a landscape of sameness, the difference and even newness of the earlier experiments become more perceptively acute? Or is it simply that my ears for popular music are sedimenting, a sign of the regression of my listening, my easing into the role of nostalgic listener (nostalgic for the avant garde)?

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52 A perfect example of this transition (from politicized avant-garde punk to glossy pop) is the metamorphosis around the turn of the 1980s of the group *Scruti Politti*. Compare the four A-sided *Scruti Politti* (Rough Trade Records, 1979) with *Songs to Remember* (Rough Trade Records, 1982).

53 The same is true when I now watch again experimental film deriving from the same period for example Sally Potter's feature *The Gold Diggers* (1983). As with the most interesting avant garde rock, this work explored precisely the tension between a critique and transformation of dominant (narrative) forms and a playful recognition of their seductive draw.

Public service versus the market ten years on: reflections on Critical Theory and the debate on broadcasting policy in the UK

RICHARD COLLINS

A decade ago *Screen* published Nicholas Garnham's 'Public service versus the market'.¹ The article set new terms for academic discussion of broadcasting policy in the UK and introduced Jürgen Habermas's work to British communication and media studies. The dichotomy, between public service and the market, which Garnham's article constituted, underpinned broadcasting policy studies over the next decade, a decade in which, as Tracey states,² most of the intellectual running was made by market theorists but which saw two major approaches to discussion and defence of public service broadcasting, one, fundamentally empirical, rooted in an analysis of and apology for the actual historical practice of European public service broadcasters³; and the other, fundamentally theoretical, rooted in Critical Theory and in Habermas's work in particular.⁴ The differences between these approaches can perhaps best be characterized by stating that the empiricists are concerned with public service broadcasters and the idealists with public service broadcasting. One is firmly bound to the concrete practice of institutions and the other to an ideal. In consequence the visions of proponents of public service broadcasting sometimes seem fanciful creations, bearing little relation to the institutions familiar to European viewers and listeners, while the actual empirical practices of public service broadcasters sometimes seem difficult to reconcile with the ideals of public service broadcasting.

¹ N Garnham 'Public service versus the market' *Screen* vol 5 no 1 (1983)

² M Tracey 'Our better angels the condition of public service broadcasting' *Media Information Australia* no 66 (1992)

³ See J Blumler (ed.) *Television and the Public Interest: Vulnerable Values in West European Broadcasting* (London: Sage, 1992)

⁴ See Garnham 'Public service versus the market'. N Garnham 'The media and the public sphere' in P. Golding et al (eds) *Communicating Politics* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986). N Garnham 'The media and the public sphere' in C. Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992). J. Keane *The Media and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

In consequence, as Negrine has observed,⁵ a lack of clarity often characterizes the advocacy of public service broadcasting. Too often it is unclear whether broadcasting or broadcasters are being defended; whether arguments are rooted in an inductive analysis or whether they articulate an 'ideal type', defined deductively. Are the criteria employed in discussion of public service broadcasting descriptive or evaluative, normative or aspirational?

If it is actual institutional practice which is at stake then the arguments can be verified or falsified through empirical and historical scrutiny. But if their referent is not actual practice, but rather an ideal, then the arguments have to be interrogated on the basis of their theoretical presuppositions. In either case, difficulties arise from a categorical differentiation of market and public service. For the similarities between both the theories advanced by proponents of market and public service broadcasting and the institutional histories of market and public service regimes are no less striking than the differences between them.

The difficulty of making categorical distinctions between public service and market principles is particularly striking in respect of the United Kingdom. For the UK has had the longest history of mixed market/public service broadcasting of all European states (and, with the exception of Canada and Australia, probably the longest experience of a mixed system of any state). But however fuzzy the distinctions may be, a theoretical approach offers a better basis for the formulation of broadcasting policy and for analysis and evaluation of the historical performance of public service broadcasters than does the rival empirical approach. For an empirical approach can only offer a measuring rod derived from the aggregate historical performance of public service broadcasters themselves. Whereas concepts generated independently of the institutions and practices which they measure make it possible to transcend the dead weight of historical 'is's' and address the fundamental issues of 'oughts'. It is to a consideration of the theoretical case made by UK scholars and proponents of public service broadcasting that I now turn.

The case for public service broadcasting

Habermas (mediated by Garnham), became the major theoretical point of reference for proponents of public service broadcasting in Britain in the 1980s, when the concept of 'the public sphere', which Garnham had first used in 'Public service versus the market' (and developed in his 1986 paper, 'The media and the public sphere'), became part of the common currency of the academic debate on broadcasting policy.⁶ Habermas provided proponents of public service broadcasting with radically new arguments. Before

6 See *inter alia* Keane *The Media and Democracy* and H. Wilson (ed.) *Australian Communications and the Public Sphere* (Melbourne: Macmillan 1989).

Garnham's brokering of Habermas to the academic community the most fully elaborated rationale for public service broadcasting put forward in the UK was to be found in the Pilkington Report.⁷ The Pilkington Committee's vision was rooted in the traditional ethos of British broadcasting, stemming from Reith's BBC, but its neo-Arnoldian, and thus rather authoritarian, vision informed the theory and practice of British broadcasting until the 1980s, when both a neo-Habermasian rationale for public service was articulated and a cogent alternative vision of the structure and role of broadcasting was put forward in the Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC – the Peacock Report.⁸

Pilkington believed that the audience for broadcasting was vulnerable and should be protected. Radio and, in particular, television (which the Committee judged to be 'the main factor in influencing the values and moral standards of our society')⁹ needed to be organized so that viewers (and listeners) were protected, not only from the baleful influence of a powerful medium, but also from themselves and their own tastes and desires. 'To give the public what it wants', Pilkington stated, 'seems at first sight unexceptionable'. But it is 'patronizing and arrogant'.¹⁰ For to do so is to assume that viewers and listeners not only know what they want but also want what is good for them. Such a view, Pilkington argued, mistakes 'what the public wants . . . for the public interest'.¹¹ Formulations such as these make it hard to resist the view that Pilkington believed broadcasting required to be controlled by Platonic Guardians, acting as servants of the public but certainly not expected to take directions from them.

Pilkington's was a very Arnoldian vision, not surprisingly, for Arnold's vision of culture as 'the best that has been thought and said in the world', and as an emancipator, 'the great help out of our present difficulties',¹² has historically underpinned broadcasting in the UK. Arnold's ideas, for example, lie behind the well known definition of public service broadcasting by a former Director General of the BBC, Sir William Haley, as a kind of cultural mountaineering,¹³ and behind the less well known, but still eloquent, statements of other Directors General of the BBC, such as Charles Curran and Alasdair Milne. Curran asserted that the BBC's responsibility was to educate 'the audience to make the choices which have been communicated to it. We must not allow ourselves to slip into the despairing attitude of seeing ourselves as casting pearls before swine . . . The course of wisdom is for us to see ourselves as casting our pearls before people who have been taught by us to appreciate their value'.¹⁴ And Milne, in a particularly messianic version of the BBC's traditional 'transmission mentality', suggested that 'broadcasting is not a matter of one person sending a signal to another . . . it is a process of scattering and thus sowing seed far wide [sic]. Some will fall on stoney ground and some on

⁷ *Report of the Committee on Broadcasting* (Pilkington), Cmnd 1753 (London: HMSO, 1962).

⁸ *Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC* (Peacock), Cmnd 9824 (London: HMSO, 1986).

⁹ Pilkington Report para 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* paras 44–48.

¹¹ *Ibid.* para 408.

¹² M. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 6.

¹³ Haley argued for a broadcasting policy which would lead people upwards – the listener being induced through the years increasingly to discriminate in favour of the things that are more worthwhile. Each programme at any given moment must be ahead of its public. Quoted in A. Smith (ed.), *British Broadcasting* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1974), pp. 83–4.

¹⁴ Quoted in Smith, *British Broadcasting*.

fertile ground. Broadcasting means that the sower waits to see what grows'.¹⁵

Haley, Curran and, as the Peacock Committee recognized, Milne clearly give voice to the authoritarian side of the British philosophy of public service broadcasting. Here too there are notable echoes of Arnold. The authoritarian dimension of Arnold's doctrines of sweetness and light are less often recognized than the emancipatory claims he made for culture. But Arnold had a clear, very Pilkingtonian, conception of the interdependence of culture and political order. He wrote:

A state in which law is authoritative and sovereign, a firm and settled course of public order, is requisite if man is to bring to maturity anything precious and lasting now or to found anything precious and lasting for the future. Thus, in our eyes, the very framework and exterior order of the state, whoever may administer the state, is sacred; and culture is the most resolute enemy of anarchy, because of the great hopes and designs for the state which culture teaches us to nourish.¹⁶

It is easier to trace the influence of Matthew Arnold on public service broadcasting than it is to trace the influence of Critical Theory. In this sense a discussion of Habermas and the British neo-Habermasians, and their role in broadcasting policy, is a strictly academic project. In the context of a journal issue devoted to Critical Theory and its pertinence to the mass media it is particularly salutary to recognize how little influence Habermas and other Critical Theorists have actually had on the principles and practice of public service broadcasting in the United Kingdom. However, although a neo-Habermasian influence on UK broadcasting policy has yet to be realized, its potential importance cannot be doubted. For the neo-Habermasians both anticipated and responded to a change in the terms in which UK broadcasting policy was discussed. Publication of the Peacock Report signalled a radical change in the superordinate values involved. Peacock's proposals were based on libertarian values rather than on the authoritarian values in which the Pilkington Report was grounded. They constituted a particularly powerful challenge to the intellectual and institutional hegemony of public service broadcasting and its proponents. The discovery of Habermas and the possibility his work offered for the development of a libertarian rationale for public service broadcasting was therefore both timely and necessary.

Thus, although Garnham's 1983 article was titled 'Public service versus the market' (and the UK broadcasting policy debate of the last decade does appear to have been conducted by irreconcilable antagonists), important values are now shared by proponents of public service and market principles. Habermas, in other words, offered proponents of public service broadcasting the emancipatory

and libertarian arguments which they needed to meet and challenge the powerful libertarian arguments of the marketeers.¹⁷

The neo-Habermasian defence of public service broadcasting

Garnham took Habermas's notion of the public sphere¹⁸ from a brief essay (originally an encyclopaedia article) first published in English in 1974 in *New German Critique* (and later reprinted in Mattelart and Siegelau, the source which Garnham cited).¹⁹ Habermas's book, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, was first published in German in 1962 (a translation was published in the UK in 1989),²⁰ and it seems appropriate, therefore, to re-examine the ideas which Garnham advanced a decade ago by reference to a fuller version of Habermas's arguments than that available in the seven page essay on which Garnham drew.

Garnham argued that contemporary emphases on market, rather than public service, mechanisms for the organization of broadcasting were inimical to the public interest. For, he claimed, public service principles of organization are superior

to the market as a means of providing all citizens, whatever their wealth or geographical location, equal access to a wide range of high-quality entertainment, information and education, and as a means of ensuring that the aim of the programme producer is the satisfaction of a range of audience tastes rather than only those tastes that show the largest profit.²¹

In contrast, the market led to diminished diversity, to a reduction in the number of enterprises which control (or at least very strongly influence) the production and circulation of information and culture, and to inequitable relationships between dominant, metropolitan enterprises and subordinate, peripheral entities. These market driven inequities in turn sustained pervasive and deep rooted social inequality which technological change promised, contrary to the libertarian and libratory rhetoric of its advocates, to accelerate.

However, Garnham also argued, persuasively, that the prevailing State/Market conceptual dualism had stultified debate. He therefore called for a third term, 'the public sphere', so as to escape that sterile antinomy, and to identify a 'space for a rational and universalistic politics distinct from both the economy and the State'²² The term 'public sphere' was explicitly borrowed from Habermas but the triadic system which Garnham proposed is a common twentieth-century intellectual trope. Toennies, for example, saw three realms (markets, states and public opinion), and Althusserian Marxists have also adopted a triadic model, with the political, the economic and the ideological making up the social whole. Garnham was not simply expressing a preference for threes

¹⁷ See for example the Peacock Report. M. Friedman and R. Friedman *Free to Choose* (New York: Avon, 1981). S. Brittan 'The fight for freedom in broadcasting' *Political Quarterly* vol. 58 no. 1 (1987).

¹⁸ An awkward translation of Habermas's term *Öffentlichkeit* but one which has become so sanctified by use that it is inescapable. Public forum might have been better than public sphere.

¹⁹ J. Habermas 'The public sphere' *New German Critique* no. 3 (1974) reprinted in A. Mattelart and S. Siegelau (eds) *Communication and Class Struggle* (New York: International General, 1979).

²⁰ J. Habermas *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).

²¹ Garnham 'Public service versus the market' p. 120.

²² *Ibid.* pp. 106-7.

rather than twos, or for an abstract third categorical field intellectually distinct from the terms 'state' and 'market'. He was advocating what he, and others, have designated the institutional embodiment and guarantor of the modern public sphere: public service broadcasting.²³ Public service broadcasting is, Garnham argued, an institutional practice which mediates between political and corporate control and is bound neither by the imperatives of profit maximization nor by the maximization of political power.

Several problems arise from this. First, whilst a third term conceptually mediating between state and market may be intellectually productive and correspond to a distinctive ethos in (at least some) broadcasting institutions at (some) moments in history, the notion of the public sphere helps only to a limited extent when concrete questions of broadcasting policy and organization arise. For how is broadcasting to be funded if not by either the state or the market?²⁴ How are broadcasters and broadcasting institutions to be responsive to their users if not via the institutions of state and market? The difficulties of concretizing an autonomous public sphere doubtless explain why (as reviewers have remarked) Keane's treatise has so few specific recommendations for institutional change.²⁵

Second, the grounding of arguments for public service broadcasting in Habermas's work is curious. Habermas's *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* may have been written in a society where broadcasting services were provided by perhaps the most perfect form of public service broadcasting yet institutionalized, but it mentions broadcasting hardly at all. When Habermas does refer to broadcasting he does so with something close to complete disdain, and unequivocally asserts the inferiority of the audiovisual media to print media as a basis of rational understanding and democratic exchange:

Radio, film and television by degrees reduce to a minimum the distance that a reader is forced to maintain toward the printed letter – a distance that required the privacy of the appropriation as much as it made possible the publicity of a rational-critical exchange about what had been read. With the arrival of the new media the form of communication as such has changed, they have had an impact, therefore, more penetrating (in the strict sense of the word) than was ever possible for the press. Under the pressure of the 'Don't talk back!' the conduct of the public assumes a different form. In comparison with printed communications the programs sent by the new media curtail the reactions of their recipients in a peculiar way. They draw the eyes and ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance, place it under 'tutelage', which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree.²⁶

²³ See for example Keane *The Media and Democracy*

²⁴ An answer often given in the UK and other western European countries is 'via the licence fee'. However, licence fees are simply a tax (and a particularly regressive tax) under another name.

²⁵ Keane *The Media and Democracy*. See also P. Scannell's review in *Media Culture and Society*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1992).

²⁶ Habermas *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* pp. 170–1.

Unpromising ground on which to construct a defence of public service broadcasting! Moreover, there are problems with Habermas's starting point, notably with his contention that there was once a golden age when a public sphere, a forum for debate, exchange and rational collective decision making existed – none of the historically concrete candidates (the Athenian agora, the England of the bourgeois coffee shop, the New England town meeting) seem particularly convincing.²⁷ Rather as Marcuse sentimentalized nature (and anathematized modernity) in his comparison of 'love making in a meadow and in an automobile, on a lovers' walk outside the town walls and on a Manhattan street'²⁸ so Habermas sentimentalizes the coffee house, and even if we were to put this to one side, the economic base of the eighteenth-century coffee house (or even the twentieth-century Cafe Laumer), is not generalizable to the twentieth-century mass media. Precisely Habermas's point, but one which has not been sufficiently recognized by the neo-Habermasians who, in spite of their pertinent recognition of the 'problem raised by all forms of mediated communication, namely, how are the material resources necessary for that communication made available and to whom?'²⁹ still invoke public service broadcasting as a mediation between the jungle of the market and the tyranny of the state without showing how it can be independently funded

Fraser's designation of the idea of the public sphere as a 'conceptual resource'³⁰ identifies a more promising basis for an appropriation of Habermas by proponents of nonmarket broadcasting (and one more in keeping with the fundamentally deductive conceptual strategies of the British neo-Habermasians). But there are limits to the power even of 'conceptual resources'.

Broadcasting and the public sphere

The difficulties of institutionalizing a broadcasting public sphere is clearly demonstrated by the case of Habermas's Germany, in which a broadcasting system was established on unequivocally public service lines and in 'conditions that were immensely favourable to an independent public broadcasting system'.³¹ The German Constitutional Court has thus held that there can be no involvement by the federal state in the organization of broadcasting, and that all significant social groups should participate in its governance, and yet political parties have still been able to shape broadcasting to serve their, rather than the public's, interest.³² Indeed Habermas's etymological discussion of the terms 'public' and 'private' shows how intimately connected were the German concepts of 'public' and 'political authority'. As he states, '“lordly” and “publicus” were used synonymously, “publicare” meant to claim for the lord’.³³

²⁷ For an excellent historically grounded critique see M. Schudson 'Was there ever a public sphere? If so, when?' in Calhoun *Habermas and the Public Sphere*

²⁸ H. Marcuse *One Dimensional Man* (1964) (London: Abacus 1972) p. 70

²⁹ Garnham 'The media and the public sphere' p. 361

³⁰ N. Fraser 'Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy' in Calhoun *Habermas and the Public Sphere* p. 110

³¹ H.-G. Falkenberg 'No future? A few thoughts on public service broadcasting in the Federal Republic of Germany' *Media Culture and Society* vol. 5 no. 3/4 (1983) p. 235

³² See R. Collins and V. Porter *WDR and the Arbeiterfilm* (London: BFI 1981)

³³ Habermas *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* p. 6

European public service broadcasters' commitment to a public sphere has, then, been Janus-faced. Their commitment to informing and educating their public has too often led them to serve an audience of their own imagination. Rather than a democratic public sphere, in which the actual experience and interest of a real empirical public is represented, they have addressed the experience and interests, the public sphere, of elites. European public service broadcasting was a 'top down' broadcasting service. It constructed an idealized and reified public, to which it represented a public sphere of broadcasters' imagination. 'Bottom up' services, which gave voice to a real public (or, to use Reith's term, publics), and represented a demotic and genuinely democratic public sphere were conspicuous by their absence.

It can further be noted that whilst public service broadcasting may have embodied (but not in all jurisdictions and at all times) a genuine third way between state and market, it has not established a genuine public sphere, nor are the established structures of public service broadcasting necessarily best fitted to the realization of some future public sphere. It is difficult to reconcile Garnham's claims for the success of public service broadcasting in satisfying audience tastes with the dramatic loss of audience experienced by European public service broadcasters when they lost their national monopolies and faced commercial competition.

Indeed, what Tracey calls public service broadcasting's recognition of 'the public as audience'³⁴ did not come about spontaneously but through competition with commercial broadcasting, through, that is, public service broadcasting *in and with* the market. As Massimo Fichera (formerly a Vice President of RAI and latterly Chief Executive of Euronews) has stated, RAI won back its audience and achieved 'a fruitful balance between market forces and public service requirements' *through*, and not in spite of, its competition with Berlusconi.³⁵

Here too Habermas's etymological discussion is useful. He points out that just as 'public' and 'lordly', the public sphere and the state, were irrevocably intertwined, so too the cultural manifestation of the emergent public sphere, a growing 'representative publicness', had its roots in the culture of both the nobility and the bourgeoisie. The culture of the emergent public sphere was an elite culture (albeit rooted in the tastes and experience of the new as well as the old upper classes); if the 'humanistically cultivated courtier replaced the Christian knight' little change is likely to have been apparent to those enjoying membership of neither courtly nor merchant classes.³⁶ The common man was not the same as the educated man and the culture of the 'public' was not that of the 'mass'. The only way of making it so was (as Matthew Arnold enjoined) through education, a role which public service broadcasting has customarily performed and which has left it vulnerable to demotic and democratic critique.

³⁴ Tracey 'Our better angels' p. 21

³⁵ In 1985 RAI's share of the Italian prime time audience was 17.44% and Fininvest's (Berlusconi) 50%. In 1989 RAI had a prime time share of 49.09% and Fininvest 31.08%. See M. Fichera 'The new self confidence in public service broadcasting in Italy', *European Broadcasting Union Review*, vol. 40, no. 3 (1989), pp. 22-3.

³⁶ Habermas *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* p. 9

and to loss of audiences, thus compromising its legitimacy, particularly when alternative services have been available.

Bauman has argued that Habermas describes a 'society shaped after the pattern of a sociology seminar, that is, that there are only participants and the one thing that matters is the power of argument'.³⁷ No more than life is broadcasting reducible to the condition of a sociology seminar and it was the earnest attempts of European public service broadcasters to shape broadcasting to a condition of a seminar that gave their competitors the opportunity to offer viewers a more demotic and carnivalesque programme diet, to tempt audiences away from the seminar to the funfair.

In 'Public service versus the market', Garnham identified the public and private spheres as antithetical, and argued that the private sphere is expanding at the expense of the public sphere as 'commodity exchange invades wider and wider areas of social life'.³⁸ For Garnham what differentiates the private and public spheres is ownership. The private sphere is a sphere of private ownership where the privileged have appropriated discursive space which was formerly public. This line of argument suggests that discursive space is a finite resource, over which private and public spheres compete, and that the growth of the private sphere is analogous to the private enclosure of common land. But Habermas contends that the historical expansion of the private sphere was liberating, as activities which had once been part of the public sphere were privatized, and the domain of personal autonomy increased. For Habermas the secularization of society, whereby religion became a private matter, was a powerful instance of the *desirability* of the appropriation of the public sphere by the private.³⁹

For Habermas, then, the privatization of society was the means whereby a public sphere came into existence: 'The bourgeois public sphere could be understood as the sphere of private individuals assembled into a public body', and he suggests explicitly that 'Today, newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere'.⁴⁰ However, he does *not* specify that public ownership of the media is necessary to (or private ownership incompatible with) a well functioning public sphere. Indeed, he apparently believes that 'the liberal public sphere took shape in the specific historical circumstances of a developing market economy'.⁴¹

The suggestions that the privatization of the public sphere was positive, that a public sphere might be delivered by the market and privately owned institutions, have evoked few sympathetic echoes from British neo-Habermasians. Keane, for example, emphatically rejects libertarian claims that organization of the media (including broadcasting) on a market basis extends freedom, arguing that 'liberty and equality are unsafe' in market liberalism, that public service media and market liberalism are inimical and that, therefore, public service media 'should attempt to counter head-on the market

³⁷ Z. Bauman *Intimations of Post-Modernity* (London: Routledge 1992) p. 217

³⁸ Garnham 'Public service versus the market' p. 121

³⁹ Habermas 'The public sphere' p. 51

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 49

⁴¹ See Thomas McCarthy's introduction to Habermas *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* p. xi

liberal strategy of the free market guided by the tough state'.⁴² For Keane the history of the media is not one of whiggish progressivism but one of oligarchy camouflaged under a rhetorical frosting of libertarianism. Murdock suggests similarly that 'technological change and privatization policies are creating massive communication conglomerates with an unrivalled capacity to shape the symbolic environment which we all inhabit', and, in consequence, 'an essential resource for developing and deepening democracy' is being denied to media users.⁴³

The obvious importance of these rival claims concerning private and public media demands that they be tested both empirically and theoretically. Are there actual instances of the public sphere delivered by privately owned institutions? And if not is their absence necessary or contingent? Could a public sphere delivered by the market and privately owned institutions exist in different circumstances? *Prima facie* instances of a market public sphere (the possibility theoretically established by Habermas) can be found. The UK's elite national press, for example, comprises five daily newspapers each owned by a different corporation and each of which has a distinctive political position (albeit, of course, within the framework of the UK's parliamentary democracy and capitalist economy). But it is certainly more difficult to identify a comparable case in broadcasting. An obvious candidate is the UK ITV system in its pre-1990 Broadcasting Act form; but this example need not delay us too long, for the ITV system was very highly regulated and built around a system of monopolies. Certainly it was privately owned (and very profitable for its dominant members), but it satisfied few of the criteria which neoclassical economists have defined as characteristic of a well functioning competitive market.

We have inherited a debate structured around three nodes, the state, the market and a third term, the public sphere/public service broadcasting, all of which are complex and around none of which is there any clear consensus as to what is meant by them. Still less is there agreement as to how the institutions to which the terms refer are to be evaluated. What is clear is that the major participants in the debate share a common goal for broadcasting policy; the increase of human liberty. Where they differ is in their allegiance to different institutional and organizational means through which the desired end is to be secured.

Freedom to and freedom from

Established institutional interests and their ideological shield bearers have for too long sought to deny the strengths in their opponents' position and the weaknesses in their own. A more productive way to move the theoretical debate forward (I am not so starry-eyed as to

believe that there is very much likelihood of changes in academic discourse making any difference to how the champions of institutional interests and their attendant squires will make policy) may be to recognize that while proponents of both market and public service structures are concerned to realize a common goal, freedom, one side invokes what Berlin called positive freedom and the other side invokes what he called negative freedom.⁴⁴

Berlin defines negative freedom (or liberty) as 'The area within which the subject . . . is left to do or be what he [sic] is able to do or be, without interference by other persons', whereas positive freedom (or liberty) is 'the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that'.⁴⁵ The extent of negative freedom depends on 'how many choices are open to me (though the method of counting these can never be more than impressionistic)'. The extent of positive freedom ('the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master') is not in principle limited by others but is dependent on the power of an individual (or group) to achieve goals which only her or his (or a group's) own incapacity (rather than duress exercised by others), would prevent her/him (them) from achieving.⁴⁶ Berlin's argument here is fundamentally Kantian and is based on Kant's recognition that humans were disabled by their own incapacities (from which they could be emancipated by other humans) as well as by the duress imposed upon them.

Kant stated (in a passage cited by Habermas) that

Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* 'Have courage to use your own reason!' – that is the motto of enlightenment.⁴⁷

Thus, Kant argued, social action and social solidarity are necessary to realize what Berlin termed positive freedom. Moreover, because humans are interdependent, the freedom of one is dependent on the manner and degree of the exercise of the freedom of the other 'freedom for the pike is death for the minnows', as Berlin put it.⁴⁸ And Berlin shows how the well intentioned exercise of positive freedom by a group on behalf of its members, the coercion of 'men in the name of some goal (let us say, justice or public health) which they would, if they were more enlightened, themselves pursue' may also become despotic.⁴⁹ Yet although there is a *potential* danger of despotism in the exercise of positive freedom this will not necessarily be the case. The exercise of positive freedom cannot be devalued in relation to negative freedom because of a *potential* danger of harm. Nor can the exercise of negative freedom be disqualified on the

⁴⁴ I Berlin *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1969)

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* pp 121–2

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* pp 130–1

⁴⁷ I Kant 'What is enlightenment?' in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1784) (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill 1959) p 85. See Habermas *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* p 104

⁴⁸ Berlin *Four Essays on Liberty* p 124

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* pp 132–3

grounds that it actually (or potentially) harms the capacity to exercise positive freedom. For if negative freedom is subordinated to positive freedom then 'Liberty, so far from being incompatible with authority, becomes virtually identical with it', or, put another way, 'sovereignty of the people could easily destroy that of individuals'.⁵⁰

There can be no doubt that the re-regulation of European broadcasting during the last decade (notably through the European Community's Television without Frontiers Directive, the successive actions of the Competition Directorate of the Commission of the European Communities DG IV, and the Council of Europe's Convention on Transfrontier Television) has significantly extended 'negative freedom'. Viewers have access to more services, broadcasters have more ready access to programme rights, and producers have better access to more markets than ever before. And in contrast to the embattled European bearers of positive freedom in broadcasting – the public service broadcasters – negative freedoms are 'guaranteed' (in so far as agreements can guarantee anything) in a variety of declarations and treaties.⁵¹

If the introduction of new services has led to important increases in viewers' and listeners' 'negative freedom', it has not significantly improved the responsiveness of broadcasting to its consumers, nor done much to extend positive freedom, and the bearers of 'positive freedom' in broadcasting, the public service broadcasters, are increasingly embattled. Proponents of public service broadcasting may be right to insist on the inadequacy of a broadcasting order based on the institutions and doctrines of negative freedom, but the dangers inherent in a regime of positive freedom are no less serious.

51 Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights for example, enshrine important aspects of negative communication freedoms. So too does the Treaty of Rome from which the Competition Directorate of the European Community derives its powers. For further discussion of European broadcasting policy see R. Collins, 'In dubious conflict – DG IV and the EBU', *Media Policy Review*, no 3 (1992).

Tutelage

Habermas writes that 'Liberation from self-incurred tutelage meant enlightenment. With regard to the individual, this denoted a subjective maxim, namely; to think for oneself . . . enlightenment had to be mediated by the public sphere'.⁵² Here Habermas clearly offers a foothold for proponents of public service broadcasting, but a foothold provided by Kant. Citing Kant's 'What is enlightenment?', Habermas argues that 'For any single individual to work himself out of the life under tutelage which has become almost his nature is very difficult'.⁵³ Clearly proponents of public service broadcasting (from Reith through Pilkington to the neo-Habermasians) have seen it as a mediating institution, in the public sphere, which assists individuals to work themselves out of 'tutelage'.

However, Habermas does not cite other sections of 'What is enlightenment?'. Kant also states that:

Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a portion of mankind, after nature has long since discharged them from

52 Habermas *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* p 104

53 *Ibid.* See also Kant 'What is enlightenment?', p 86

external direction (naturaliter maiorennnes), nevertheless remains under lifelong tutelage, and why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is so easy not to be of age. If I have a book which understands for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a physician who decides my diet, and so forth, I need not trouble myself. I need not think, if I can only pay – others will readily undertake the irksome work for me.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Kant 'What is enlightenment?'
p. 85

This passage has the authentic smack of Kant's earnest Prussian pietism. It affords little space for fun, diversion or the seductions of being not of age, but stands as a powerful rationale for benevolent social action. The Arnoldian statements of the Directors General of the BBC cited earlier thus fit the Kantian model very well (and there are ominous signs that what has come to be called Birt's 'Himalayan Strategy' – moving the BBC onto the cultural high ground – will do the same). Both the Arnoldian and Kantian approaches rest on the contradiction which lies at the centre of public service broadcasting's emancipatory project. It emancipates on the terms set by the broadcasting elites, rather than on terms set by the community as a whole. For as authentic an element of the core belief system of public service broadcasting as its emancipatory commitment is its disdain for popular taste. As Habermas states:

mass culture has earned its rather dubious name precisely by achieving increased sales by adapting to the need for relaxation and entertainment on the part of consumer strata with relatively little education, rather than through the guidance of an enlarged public toward the appreciation of a culture undamaged in its substance.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Habermas *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* p. 165

It is easy to see commercial broadcasting as embodying Kant's vision of being not of age, as immersion in a 'book which understands for me'. But we may also see public service broadcasting as an agency through which, willingly, man embraces his tutelage. What more clearly than Pilkington's account of broadcasting exemplifies Kant's notion of 'a pastor who has a conscience for me, a physician who decides my diet'? Pilkington referred to

the Governors' and Members' concern . . . to represent and secure the public interest in broadcasting. It is for them to judge what the public interest is, and it is for this that they are answerable. They must not do so by assessing the balance of opinion on this or that element of programme content, and then adopting the majority view as their own; for as we have already noted, this would be to mistake 'what the public wants' in the misleading sense implied when the phrase is used as a slogan – for the public interest.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Pilkington Report para 408

Habermas's locution, 'through the guidance of an enlarged public toward the appreciation of a culture undamaged in its substance',

refers, similarly, not to a relationship of equals but to a Pilkingtonian guidance of consumers by guardians away from what Habermas calls 'consumption ready' cultural goods to 'serious involvement with culture'.⁵⁷ And here is the crux of the problem about public service broadcasting enlightenment, the maximization of positive freedom, requires social action and liberation from ignorance ('self-incurred tutelage'), but to think for oneself is to think unconstrained by authority, to be emancipated from a repressive pedagogy. Audiences' rejection of public service broadcasters' offerings cannot be repudiated on the grounds that viewers are not thinking for themselves or are acting under duress even if such rejections are judged as a refusal to be freed from self-incurred tutelage. The contradiction can only be surmounted if audiences *voluntarily* adopt the emancipation (putatively) offered by public service broadcasters. Often they do not, and the crisis of European public service broadcasting is a crisis which has become insistently visible as a consequence of the rapid increase of choice and competition. But we cannot assume that the crisis is *caused* by these circumstances. Proponents of public service broadcasting confront an unresolved problem: how to reconcile their commitment to democracy and emancipation (a public sphere) with the authoritarian nature of broadcasting systems grounded in Kantian (and Arnoldian) doctrines of emancipation from tutelage.

The public service versus the market debate

The perhaps excessively 'theoretical' character of discussion of tutelage above can readily be translated into a concrete mapping of the terrain over which the debate between proponents of public service broadcasting and proponents of the market has flowed. Market theorists argue that 'political markets' are fixed by elites and that 'free' market mechanisms at last free individual consumers to realize their right to express their preferences to suppliers through the price system. Public service advocates argue that the market model of equal and atomized market actors simply camouflages a striking disparity in power between corporate persons and human beings. It is easy enough for commentators on both sides to impute bad faith to their interlocutors.

What is lacking in such arguments is proper evidence. Critics of the market organization of broadcasting, for example, argue that the market undersupplies programming to economically powerless viewers (the undersupply of children's programming is the most striking case) and claim that competition institutes a 'Gresham's Law' in programming whereby vulnerable enterprises, in order to survive, screen programmes which are attractive to viewers but undesirable for reasons of public policy. Thus Hoffman-Riem states

⁵⁸ W Hoffman-Riem 'Defending vulnerable values: regulatory measures and enforcement dilemmas' in J Blumler *Television and the Public Interest: Vulnerable Values in West European Broadcasting* (London: Sage 1992) p 189

⁵⁹ See R Cathcart *The Most Contrary Region: The BBC in Northern Ireland 1924–1984* (Belfast: Blackstaff 1984)

⁶⁰ N Garnham 'Editorial: Media Culture and Society' vol 5 no 1 (1983)

that 'The more heated the battle for ratings, the smaller the chance for the observance of the corresponding duties'.⁵⁸

Empirical work to test Hoffman-Riem's proposition might yield interesting results. Intuitively his argument seems plausible, but striking exceptions spring to mind. Competition in broadcasting can give voice to those who have hitherto been silent: witness the significant rise in television's representation of the experience and circumstances of Northern Ireland's Catholic minority after the introduction of commercial television to the Province – commercial television had a financial incentive to secure an audience from the Catholic population which had formerly been underrepresented by the BBC monopoly.⁵⁹ Moreover libertarians might argue that the effect of such competition (if we grant Hoffman-Riem's contention) is in fact desirable in that it pushes back the boundaries of state censorship and control of viewers' access to information. Only broadcasters threatened by economic circumstances will be desperate enough to challenge state power and extend the boundaries of free expression. A consensus on the appropriateness of the duties vested in broadcasters by political authorities cannot be taken for granted. Garnham's influential *Screen* article of a decade ago framed the key question in the determination of broadcasting policy as 'Public service or the market'. The power of this conceptual dualism remains apparent: for example, the major contemporary institutional conflict in European broadcasting (between the European Broadcasting Union and the Competition Directorate of the Commission of the European Communities) can very easily be mapped onto this antithesis. Yet although there is a clear adversarial level at which these conflicts are played out (such as in the institutional rivalry between public service incumbents and new commercial rivals – (RAI versus Berlusconi, the ARD/ZDF versus RTL+, NOS versus RTL4, Antenne 2/FR 3 versus Canal Plus and TF1, and so on), it is less clear that there is a *necessary* irreconcilability between public service and market principles.

In a second article published in 1983 Garnham argued strongly for the superior power of Critical Theory to the prevailing UK leftist orthodoxy of Althusserian Marxism.⁶⁰ It is hard to disagree. The subsequent influence of Habermas's writings (I am tempted to say 'writing') on the academic debate on broadcasting policy in Britain testifies both to the accuracy of Garnham's judgement and to the influence of his *Screen* article. The rationale for Garnham's advocacy of Habermas's concept of the public sphere was that it provided a libertarian basis for advocates of public service broadcasting. But its use has also reconfirmed some of the 'profound weaknesses in the analytical tools available within British media studies' which Garnham had originally identified, most notably the cultural elitism which has left public service broadcasting so vulnerable to populist critique and competition.

Keane does recognize the deficiencies of public service broadcasting in this respect, and states that 'Public service media corset audiences and violate their own principle of equality of access for all to entertainment, current affairs and cultural resources in a common public domain'.⁶¹ But Keane's genuflection to the demotic does not lead him to refuse the dualistic problematic of 'public service versus the market' within which his challenging discussion of the media and democracy remains. It is a sad irony that the poor, in whose name so many of the critiques of market allocations in broadcasting are being made, are disproportionately represented among the subscribers to pay-TV. If public service broadcasting was giving the C2 and D social groups what they wanted why would they pay for BSkyB?

UK scholars' selection from the Habermasian inheritance has been very particular and rather unfortunate. From an admittedly contradictory patrimony has been taken the notion of the public sphere and its prioritization of political discourse (inform and educate); what has not been taken is any recognition of the positive role of commercial media. This is to retain the public service versus market antithesis which has not helped proponents of public service broadcasting either to rebut, or to integrate into a theoretical synthesis friendly to their cause, market theorists' compelling critique of public service broadcasting for its susceptibility to elite capture, its waste of resources, and its tendency to lose contact with the needs and desires of its audiences.

This is not to pass over the well-founded complementary critique by advocates of public service broadcasting of broadcasting markets, which equally clearly lend themselves to the capture of broadcasting institutions by corporate power, to an undersupply of programming to economically and politically disempowered audiences, and to the reduction of aggregate welfare through use of the price system to exclude consumers from access to broadcasting services. My point is, rather, that the binary structure of the debate, public service versus the market, has inhibited a recognition that there are two types of freedom, that broadcasting policy should be directed towards the maximization of both positive and negative freedom and that a more fruitful approach to policy analysis may be to constitute public service and the market as non-exclusive categories. And thus to seek a broadcasting policy which maximizes their complementarities and recognizes that each organizing principle may be necessary but neither is sufficient for the realization of public policy goals

Clearly the policy conclusion is that a system which combines both positive and negative freedoms is required. The historical evidence suggests that such a system exists neither in circumstances where public service broadcasting has a monopoly nor in circumstances where commercial broadcasting, is overwhelmingly dominant. A mixed system is required. This may seem an underwhelming

conclusion but it is not one which can be derived from the arguments of either the neo-Habermasians or the market theorists. It is to an analysis of the many different kinds of mixed broadcasting systems that the study of broadcasting policy and institutions should now turn. Rather than continuing to rehearse a sterile debate we should consider how the libertarian goals espoused in the last decade by proponents of both public service and market principles of broadcasting can best be realized. Both the values – notably the concept of freedom – and the methods – notably its dialectical and iconoclastic character – of Critical Theory will be central to this project.

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reports and debates

debate

Textual obsessions: methodology, history and researching female spectatorship

JACKIE STACEY

One of the most notable features of methodological debate within film studies is its paucity. Partly as a result of being based in a sociology department for the last four years, and partly due to having worked on various interdisciplinary degrees recently, I have been repeatedly struck by the fact that methodological questions seem to be so unevenly treated in different academic disciplines. Film studies (unlike sociology) typically falls into the group which rarely debates questions of methodology.¹

Several reasons readily spring to mind for the lack of attention to such questions. The most obvious is the debt that film studies owes to its humanities-based counterpart, literary studies, which has itself seldom investigated methodological questions. Whilst there has been a thorough deconstruction of the literary canon in terms of its *content*, this has not been accompanied by a critical consideration of what might be called the 'canonical method', namely 'textual analysis', which continues to reign supreme as the *obvious* method for understanding literature. Indeed, the proclamation of the 'death of the author' in the 1970s, together with the continuing marginality of any serious interest in readers, has left textual analysis very definitely the preferred disciplinary method within literary studies.

¹ There are exceptions to this: see Janet Staiger *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992) also the plenary topic for the 1993 *Screen Studies Conference* is notably 'Historical Methodologies'. For an unusually self-reflective piece on memory, method and textual interpretation see Annette Kuhn *Mandy and possibility* *Screen* vol. 33 no. 3 (1992) pp. 233–43. Interestingly if methodology is considered seriously within film studies it is invariably through the discourse of film history.

This in itself is not necessarily problematic: perhaps textual analysis is the most suitable method for literary analysis. However, two issues are still in need of further discussion: first, the lack of explicit methodological debate; and second, the resulting invisibility of the selection processes which place the method of textual analysis centre-stage

Similarly, in film studies there has rarely been any substantial discussion of important methodological questions. Instead, the canonical method of literary studies, textual analysis, has been adopted (if adapted) without a great deal of selfconscious commentary. It has remained exceptional for those in film studies to engage seriously with questions concerning the status of the film text in the study of the cinema. Why focus upon the film text rather than the cinema audience? How might different audiences read films differently? Can films be understood outside the context of their industrial production, and how might the cinema be connected to other cultural industries? What are the problems of an academic reading of a 1940s film in the 1990s? How might the film text be read differently within different national or historical locations? These and many other such issues have remained marginal, if not absent, from much film studies teaching and research

Furthermore, there is insufficient debate about what exactly is meant by 'textual analysis' in film studies.² There seems to be little shared understanding within the discipline about what exactly is involved here and whether there are identifiable skills which students new to the field should be expected to acquire. This is not to advocate a narrow, prescriptive standardization, which, in the present climate of the conservative vocational educational policy, it might be important to resist in the name of challenging rigid definitions of 'useful knowledge'; rather, it is to argue for greater reflexivity within film studies in order to open up the boundaries of the subject and its methods to contestation and debate.

Film studies' allegiance to literary studies (and to the humanities more generally) may suggest another reason for the absence of methodological debate: a scepticism about the disciplinary origins of methodological concerns which are often seen to emanate from the more empirical traditions of the social sciences. Like literary studies, film studies has always been keen to distinguish itself from sociology and communication studies, whose approaches to the media it has (often rightly) discarded as problematically empiricist, and whose claims to produce 'objective' truths about the media and its effects it has not emulated.³ Since film studies does not share the aspiration for 'scientific' status of some of the more social-science-based disciplines it might be argued that questions of methodology remain irrelevant. However, this argument evades more important issues. Methodological questions, I would suggest, need to be debated in

² See Richard Dyer 'Notes on textual analysis' in Christine Gledhill (ed.) *Film and Media Studies in Higher Education* (London: BFI Publishing, 1981) pp. 145-51

³ Empiricism has become a shorthand for dismissing research as naive or crude and critics rarely explicate whether their objection to it is on methodological, epistemological or historical grounds. See Ien Ang 'Wanted audiences: on the politics of empirical audience studies' in Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner and Eva Maria Warth (eds) *Remote Control: Television Audiences and Cultural Power* (London: Routledge, 1989) pp. 96-115

film studies because without such a debate the politics of knowledge remain hidden and mystified.

Questions of methodology are important not only in terms of sources and objects of study, but also in terms of the selection of particular interpretive theoretical frameworks. Indeed, there is often a close connection between the two. For example, the centrality of psychoanalysis within film studies has been related to the dominant methodological practice of textual analysis. This has undoubtedly been a central reason (though there are many others) for the relative marginality of audience research in this field, in stark contrast to television studies where audience studies have proliferated. Drawing on psychoanalysis, theories of cinema spectatorship have tended to privilege questions of unconscious processes, thus rendering 'audience studies' irrelevant.

Whilst such problems have been debated within television studies⁴ and indeed in cultural studies, which has a long history of audience research and of methodological debate, they continue to be relatively neglected within film studies. There has been too little discussion of what it means to apply psychoanalytic theory to a film text. Such discussion would investigate whether the basis for such an approach is an analogy between the text and the psyche, and, if so, what are the limits of such an analogy. It would explore the differences between a film text and a human psyche and whether we need *different* theories to understand each. Furthermore, it might analyse how and why psychoanalysis has been seen as inimical to audience research (especially given that Freud's original work was based upon people's accounts of their experiences) and whether audience studies are necessarily only concerned with conscious meanings.

It might be argued that these methodological issues *are* already debated within film studies, but not under the recognizable label of 'methodology'. In some cases this may well be true: debates about 'film theory', for example, obviously overlap with certain methodological questions. However, the methodological issues tend to remain invisible and are rarely isolated for particular consideration. Do students in film studies, for example, know that textual analysis is a chosen rather than an inevitable method? How often is audience research presented as a legitimate alternative? It seems to me that whilst production studies and studies of authorship still find a place, if a marginal one, on the film studies agenda, audience studies continue to be a striking absence.

Indeed, it would be interesting to explore the relationship between the neglect of the cinema audience and the lack of explicit methodological debate in film studies. Would the inclusion of audience analysis necessarily bring with it further consideration of methodological questions? If so, would this simply be because, as such a marginal method, it requires justification, or because the

⁴ See for example: Serter et al (eds) *Remote Control* and Charlotte Brunsdon 'Television aesthetics and audiences' in Patricia Mellencamp (ed.) *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (London: BFI Publishing/Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press 1990) pp. 59–72.

actual processes of doing audience research necessitate academic consideration of methodological issues in a way that doing textual analysis does not? Whilst methodology remains an uncontested issue, the cinema audience can easily be labelled naive and unsophisticated in comparison with the academic film critic's reading of the text. Instead of such a blanket dismissal, I would welcome further debate about how cinema audiences might be studied *without* falling into the pitfalls of 'crude empiricism', or what the areas of overlap or divergence might be between the textual analysis of films and of audiences' accounts of the cinema, or indeed whether it is possible (or desirable) to theorize the unconscious pleasures of the cinema through audience studies.

There may also be practical reasons for the reluctance on the part of film theorists to venture into the area of audience research. Theoretical anxieties concerning 'crude empiricism' apart, there are material issues which have prevented researchers from investigating cinema audiences. The ease of conducting textual analysis certainly compares favourably with the uncertainties and practical problems of audience research: almost invariably, the former is more straightforward, less time-consuming and more manageable. The film text is a discrete object of study which is usually relatively accessible, in contrast to audiences who have to be selected, contacted, and whose opinions and feelings have to be collected before any analysis can even begin. Studying cinema audiences from the past adds further problems to questions of 'access' and additionally complicates interpretive strategies because of the role of memory in structuring audiences' accounts of their viewing practices.

Furthermore, the political and ethical questions of the relationship of researcher to cinema audiences have not had to be dealt with directly when 'texts' rather than people are under scrutiny.⁵ This has presented particular dilemmas for *feminist* researchers in the field who have been concerned with the unequal power relations between researcher and researched. It is certainly less controversial within the politics of feminist research to make critical judgements about film texts than about the female audiences who enjoy them. This has been consistently true of feminist film criticism in which Hollywood cinema has been condemned so vehemently for reproducing patriarchal ideology, and its pleasures rejected for operating in accordance with masculine fantasies. The earlier phases of feminist film criticism, in particular, displayed a tendency to see patriarchal cinema as somewhat monolithic, and within such a framework it has been easier to condemn the dominant cinematic institutions and the films they produce than to analyse the women in the cinema audience to whom Hollywood may have meant so much. Hence, the study of women audiences has been more common in cultural studies, where an emphasis on resistant and oppositional cultures

⁵ For a discussion of the relationship between feminist researchers and female audiences/readers see Janice Radway's works *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1984). Identifying ideological seams: mass culture analytical method and political practice in *Communication* no. 9 pp. 93-123. Reception study ethnography and the problems of dispersed audiences and nomadic subjects *Cultural Studies* vol. 2 no. 3 pp. 359-76.

has always been maintained. Here the active role of the audience in interaction with, or contestation of, dominant cultural meanings has been foregrounded. Perhaps such an approach is more compatible with an interest in female audiences; at least it has enabled the feminist critic to avoid the uncomfortable and problematic position of using women's accounts to demonstrate how pervasive patriarchal culture might be.⁶ A feminist analysis of women in the cinema audience, then, is a potential minefield of political, ethical and methodological problems.

However, given that the subject of female spectatorship has dominated the agenda of feminist film criticism for almost two decades now, it does seem quite incredible that the investigation of spectators (by which I mean here 'members of the cinema audience') rather than texts remains so marginal in film studies. Despite the claim in a special issue of *Camera Obscura*⁷ that there is now a heterogeneity of meanings ascribed to the term 'the female spectator', there continues to be minimal consideration of the subject beyond textual positioning. Elizabeth Cowie's formulation exemplifies this tendency: '... [W]hat seems determining is the textual production of sexual difference, that is, the way in which a film constructs sexual difference for its narrative and characters, and, through narration, for the spectator'.⁸ Any study of female spectatorship which takes audiences' accounts, rather than textual mechanisms, as its source continues to be dismissed as naively empirical.

My own interest in methodological questions developed specifically in the context of my research into the history of female spectatorship which did *not* take the form of textual analysis.⁹ Instead I analysed spectators' accounts of the appeal of female film stars in wartime and postwar Britain. The focus of this research presented me with numerous methodological questions to which I found frustratingly few references, let alone answers, in the existing film studies literature. What follows is a discussion of some of the recurrent methodological issues which emerged. Having challenged the ways in which film studies research so often ignores methodological questions, the rest of this article presents a case study of some of the problems confronted within one particular historical project

Histories of cinematic spectatorship

Except for the legendary viewers who dove under their seats at the sight of Lumiere's train coming into the station; the countless immigrants to the US who, we are told, learned American values in the sawdust-floored nickelodeons of the Lower East Side; and those who, to a person it would seem, applauded Al Jolson's

⁶ For an analysis of the construction of the feminine as the other to feminist criticism see Charlotte Brunsdon 'Pedagogies of the feminine: feminist teaching and women's genres' *Screen* vol 32 no 4 (1991) pp 364-81

⁷ See Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane 'The female spectator: contexts and directions' *Camera Obscura* nos 20/21 (1989), pp 5-27

⁸ Elizabeth Cowie *ibid* p 129

⁹ See Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship in 1940s and 1950s Britain* (London: Routledge, 1993 forthcoming)

'You ain't seen nothing yet' in 1927; film history had been written as if films had no audiences or were seen by everyone in the same way, or as if however they were viewed and by whomever, the history of 'films' was distinct from and privileged over the history of their being taken up by the billions of people who have watched them since 1894.¹⁰

¹⁰ Robert C. Allen 'From exhibition to reception: reflections on the audience in film history' *Screen* vol. 31 no. 4 (1990) p. 348

The investigation of the historical reception of film raises important methodological questions about the relationship between the cinematic institution and the cinema spectator. What do spectators bring to films from their own specific historical and cultural locations which then influence their readings? How do the discourses of particular historical conjunctures limit the possible readings a spectator may make of a film?

Challenging both the supremacy of the text and the individual spectator as the singular location of meaning production, Janet Staiger has argued that: 'What we are interested in, then, is not the so-called correct reading of a particular film but the range of possible readings and reading processes at historical moments and their relation or lack of relation to groups of historical spectators'.¹¹ As Staiger goes on to highlight, however, the investigation of the historical spectator presents the film researcher with a whole series of complex methodological and theoretical questions about the status of audiences' accounts of films, how such accounts are to be found, and which interpretive frameworks might be useful in analysing them.¹²

¹¹ Janet Staiger *The Handmaiden of Villainy: methods and problems in studying the historical reception of film* *Wide Angle* vol. 8 no. 1 (1986) p. 20

¹² For a fuller discussion of these issues see Staiger *Interpreting Films*

One of the initial problems encountered concerns what should count as 'data' and how this material should be treated by the researcher. Finding the material in the first place is a problem, since availability is clearly difficult in the historical study of film reception. Whether written in the past, or collected retrospectively by researchers today, the material will always be shaped by discursive factors and will produce a very particular set of selective knowledges: for example, what about the processes of spectatorship which are less directly accessible? Staiger argues that such problems have meant that even in the cases where film studies work has engaged with historical concerns, the focus has tended to be on the institutional factors which may have shaped spectators' readings of particular films and has tended to ignore 'actual' spectator responses. According to Staiger, this evasion has been for good reason: it is the result of the practical, theoretical and methodological complexities that such studies pose.

Most of the historical sources available for audience research, then, will necessarily be partial and shaped by the interests of the institution in which it was produced. As Janet Staiger argues:

Audience response research is invariably linked into commercial and academic institutions, already mediated by economic and

theoretical projects at odds with any political goals of de-centering dominant practices or discourses. Marketing analyses, audience opinion polls, film reviews, interviews and letters to editors of periodicals are bound up with an apparatus of perpetuating the pleasure of the cinematic institution. Even if we acknowledge mediation and distortion these stumbling blocks can never be fully overcome.¹³

¹³ Staiger *The Handmaiden of Villainy* p. 21

This highlights some of the limitations of using existing audience-response research as a source of historical evidence. For example, letters pages in publications such as *Picturegoer* published many letters which were written in response to articles and features in the magazine. The agenda for legitimate topics was largely framed by the producers of the magazine.¹⁴ Thus whilst letters pages in film magazines may at first seem to provide suitable material for the study of cinema audiences, further consideration demonstrates the inextricability of production from consumption in this case. A second problem with this source is that the opinions of more marginal groups may not be expressed within such mainstream publications. Letters printed cannot be read as representative of all spectators.¹⁵ The selection by producers clearly determines what is printed, which is therefore only a partial representation of audiences' feelings and opinions. A further consideration is the understandable scepticism about using letters pages as evidence of audience/reader opinion, since, as 'urban legend' and more reliable academic sources have it, those printed may well be concocted by office staff at the magazine.¹⁶

¹⁴ Editors of film magazines not only chose which letters to publish but also in their editorials and features encouraged readers to address particular issues. See Stacey *Star Gazing*

¹⁵ Staiger *The Handmaiden of Villainy* p. 21

¹⁶ I am grateful to Jane Gaines for drawing my attention to this problem. However, the collection of readers' letters at the Mass Observation Archive at Sussex University suggests that in the case of *Picturegoer* at least the letters were in fact sent in by members of the public.

As well as consideration of how audiences' accounts of the cinema are produced within particular discourses, the generic conventions of letter writing for publication also need to be taken into account. Particular types of letter, such as complaints, criticism, appreciation, humorous anecdotes, and so on are recognizable forms for readers and editors, and knowledge of such forms will shape the kinds of letter written and selected for publication. Indeed, the formulae for letters pages in *Picturegoer* in the 1940s may differ little from those published elsewhere in the 1990s. Furthermore, audiences' accounts of the cinema may take a narrative form and would need to be analysed within the particular conventions of personal narrative.

To argue that this material should therefore be discounted by film historians, however, would be mistaken. Janet Staiger's claim that 'even if we acknowledge mediation and distortion, these stumbling blocks can never be fully overcome'¹⁷ implies the possibility of an unproblematic source of audience response beyond such stumbling blocks. 'Mediation' and 'distortion' suggest that there may be pure cinematic experience beyond the limitations of representation. I would argue instead that all audience researchers must deal inevitably with the question of representation, but not as a *barrier* to

¹⁷ Staiger *The Handmaiden of Villainy* p. 21

meaning, but rather as *the form* of that meaning. Given that language itself is a system of representation, any expression of taste, preference and pleasure is necessarily organized according to certain conventions and patterns. Perhaps some material is less defined by the institutional boundaries of the film industry, but all audience 'data' has its textual formations, produced within particular historical and cultural discourses. Audiences' letters, for example, are interesting cultural texts in so far as they cut across the usual cultural divides of public and private, production and consumption: they are a conventionally 'private' form – the letter – and yet written for public consumption.

Will the *real* audience please stand up?

The question of the textual conventions of popular forms is one which relates to the general analysis of media reception, whether by means of interviews, letters, or questionnaires. Within cultural studies audience research, particular attention has been paid to such conventions, in contrast to accounts which simply let the audience 'speak for itself'. As Ien Ang has argued, when analysing the responses she received to the question 'why do you like watching *Dallas*?':

[I]t would be wrong . . . to regard the letters as a direct unproblematic reflection of the reasons why the writers love or hate *Dallas*. What people say or write about their experiences, preferences, habits, etc., cannot be taken entirely at face value . . . we cannot let the letters speak for themselves, but they should be read 'symptomatically': we must search for what is behind the explicitly written, for the presuppositions and accepted attitudes concealed within them. In other words the letters must be read as texts, as discourses.¹⁸

¹⁸ Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Methuen 1985) p. 11

Ang's approach here is typical of the shift from 'the textually produced spectator' of film studies to 'the spectator as text' within cultural studies. Here textual analysis, set up in opposition to audience studies earlier in this article, returns as a method for the interpretation of audiences' accounts of the cinema. What is interesting is the extent to which it raises different methodological questions when applied to the audience rather than to the film.

This approach raises specific issues about the politics of interpretation and research. In particular, it highlights the question of the power of the researcher to interpret spectators' responses and readings from a position of expertise in the academy. Some feminist researchers have resisted treating audiences' accounts as texts for fear of being patronizing to, or dismissive of, the women concerned. For some it may seem more 'democratic' simply to let women speak

for themselves, since many women are rarely listened to in a patriarchal culture. Indeed, much early feminist oral history and documentary film aimed to 'give women a voice' and to make visible their experiences.

However, avoiding the analysis of female spectators due to embarrassment or anxiety about imposing such a framework has functioned to perpetuate their absence from film studies. The role of the researcher is surely to interpret the material that spectators produce within a critical framework which is appropriate to that material, and which is made explicit so that it can be contested. I would argue for the importance of some kind of analysis of the textual conventions of spectators' accounts of the cinema, but in a framework which is demonstrably related to the material itself. Thus, a dialectical relationship might emerge between the material studied and the theory which is used to analyse it. Female spectators' accounts of the cinema might be used to critique or comment upon existing film theory, and indeed to produce new or refined categories which could usefully add to our understanding of how films are viewed.

This shift towards a textual treatment of spectators' readings of the media brings with it another set of methodological issues of central concern to ethnographers of media audiences generally.¹⁹ For some critics the move towards audiences has simply replaced one kind of textual determinism with another. In reacting against the textual determinism in film studies, in which the texts produce their spectators, the approach exemplified by Ang above might be accused of another kind, in which audience data is treated merely as a text. Jane Feuer (1986) has suggested that there is an inherent contradiction here:

... the critic reads another text, that is to say, the text of the audience discourse. For the empirical researcher, granting a privileged status to the audience response does not create a problem. But it does for those reception theorists who acknowledge the textual status of the audience response.²⁰

As well as the issue of the textuality of audiences' accounts, the question of the unconscious presents another methodological dilemma for audience researchers. As Feuer goes on to argue:

They then have to read the unconscious of the audience without the benefit of the therapeutic situation, or they can relinquish the psychoanalytic conception of the subject – in which case there is a tendency to privilege the conscious or easily articulated response.²¹

The original challenge to the psychoanalytic textual models of analysis from these ethnographic audience studies has thus proved somewhat fruitless, since, according to Feuer, these studies have no greater insight into the spectator's unconscious responses to a text

¹⁹ See David Morley 'Changing paradigms in audience studies' in Seiter et al (eds) *Remote Control* pp 16–43

²⁰ Jane Feuer 'Dynasty' paper presented at ITSC London (1986) quoted in Morley *Changing paradigms in audience studies* p 24

²¹ *Ibid*

than the speculations of the film theorist based on textual analysis.

In this account we are left with all the old problems of textual interpretation and unconscious processes, but with the audiences rather than the film as the text in question. However, surely the point of looking at audiences is not to produce a truth claim about the 'real' meaning of a media text, but rather to argue that audiences themselves are of interest to media researchers. Treating the audiences' accounts of the media as texts means recognizing the discursive forces through which they are produced. If it is crucial to address these in terms of the institutional structures which may have shaped the material collected (such as letters pages in film magazines), it is also important to assess the ways in which linguistic conventions inform the readings reported.

Feuer's criticisms are useful in clarifying the issues and highlighting the theoretical and methodological problems in this area of research. However, she presents us here with a set of rather rigid oppositions – textual versus empirical, conscious versus unconscious – and fails to take account of the complexity of more detailed questions of interpretation. What exactly is meant here by empiricism, for example, which is so easily dismissed by its mere mention within these debates? How might audiences' accounts be considered as texts, and yet maintain a different status from the texts of film theory? How might we move beyond the simplistic ascription of audiences' responses as the 'authentic truth' about media meaning, whilst avoiding treating them as the *same* as narrative fiction? How might some aspects of the psychoanalytic conception of the subject be retained, if modified, within studies of 'real audiences'?

Several issues emerge here. First, there is the question of the 'appropriateness' of the research method. Arguing against Feuer's criticisms, David Morley has defended his ethnographic method of interviewing television audiences as:

a fundamentally more appropriate way to attempt to understand what audiences do when they watch television than for the analyst to sit at home and imagine the possible implications of how other people might watch television, in the manner that Feuer suggests.²²

²² Morley *Changing paradigms in audience studies* p. 24

What is implied by the term 'more appropriate' is crucial here. The suggestion is not that audiences are the only source of meaning, but that if we are concerned with questions of reception and cultural consumption, then the study of audiences will provide some crucial material not available to media researchers looking at the film or television programme as a text. Morley illustrates the dangers of conventional textual analysis as a speculative method with the example of the discrepancies between Modleski's arguments about why women might like soap operas²³ and the conclusions of an

²³ See Tania Modleski *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (London: Methuen, 1984)

²⁴ See Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner and Eva Maria Warth, 'Don't treat us like we're so stupid and naive towards an ethnography of soap opera viewers', in Seiter et al. *Remote Control*, pp. 223–47.

ethnographic study of a particular group of women soap opera viewers.²⁴ Similarly, I would argue that if we are interested in female spectatorship, then, as well as providing our own readings of films, it is important to find out what female spectators say about their readings of Hollywood. In other words, I am arguing for the importance of putting spectators back into theories of female spectatorship, and for the relativity of research methodologies, depending on the context and topic of research, rather than on an absolutist model with abstract prescriptions.

Secondly there is the question of the status of the material. As I have argued, audiences' responses are not self-evident truths about what the media mean; this would completely ignore the ways in which subjectivities are constituted through ideological discourses. The Althusserian and Lacanian influenced media analysis of the 1970s may have ascribed too much power to the dominant ideology and the symbolic order respectively, negating any notion of the historical agency of audiences as subjects, but to ignore issues of power relations is equally misguided. Thus audiences' accounts of the cinema do need to be treated as texts in so far as they are forms of representation produced within certain cultural conventions. In my own research, for example, processes of self-narrativization would be one such convention which needs to be seen as part of the mechanisms of memory formation. As I argue elsewhere, the material I received can be seen as narrativized accounts of the past which produce particular 'treasured memories' in which the respondents may have had certain personal investments.²⁵

²⁵ See Stacey, *Star Gazing*.

However, to take such an approach is not to argue that what audiences say is fictional, and thus of only relative significance to other fictions. Taking account of the narrative formations of audiences' memories is not to rob them of their specificity, or to treat them as fictional narratives like the films they were watching. This would be to confuse the categories of narrative and of fiction. To argue that audiences produce narrative accounts of their responses to Hollywood is not to say that they may as well have made them up! Indeed, the importance of taking account of the cultural conventions of audiences' stories is precisely to deal with them *in their specificity*.

A further question which needs to be discussed here is the supposed incompatibility of ethnographic method with a belief in the unconscious. These approaches, it is argued, are incompatible because ethnography deals with 'conscious and easily articulated response' and ignores the unconscious, whereas psychoanalytic readings would mistrust audiences' accounts, emphasizing instead the importance of unconscious processes to the meanings of visual images.

Feuer is right to suggest that there are several methodological problems here, but her model offers only two possibilities: either the

²⁶ See Morley 'Changing paradigms in audience studies'

²⁷ For example *Radway Reading the Romance* and *Watching Dallas* and Valerie Walkerdine 'Video replay families films and fantasy' in Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (eds) *Formation of Fantasy* (London: Methuen, 1986) pp. 167–99

²⁸ The question of formations of memory is not discussed in this article but see Stacey *Star Gazing*

empirical description of what audiences choose to tell researchers or the researcher's reading of the audience's unconscious.²⁶ This rigid division between ethnographic empiricism and psychoanalytic theory ignores the work which has sought to combine elements of both these approaches.²⁷ Furthermore, it evades the methodological issues involved in the psychoanalytically-informed textual analysis of film which sometimes similarly speculates about the unconscious of the audience 'without the benefit of the therapeutic situation'.

Audiences' accounts of films of course demand a consideration of cultural processes such as those of memory, identity formation, fantasy and day-dreaming, which involve unconscious beliefs and desires; however, the cinema also needs to be analysed in terms of the conscious everyday meanings it has for cinema spectators.²⁸ A consideration of psychoanalytic theory and ethnographies of media audiences needs to take account of the potential complexity of the relationships between methodological and theoretical questions. At present, the methodological problems are typically subsumed within theoretical ones, and audience studies are easily dismissed as a result.

Producing the past

In cases where the research is also of a historical nature, questions of memory and of constructions of 'the past' add further complexities to this already challenging methodological terrain.²⁹ The form of the request for audiences' memories of the cinema of past decades has particular effects upon the kind of data produced. In my own case, my advertisement for responses clearly had a determining effect on the material I received. Asking for recollections of favourite stars from 'keen cinemagoers of the 1940s and 1950s', for example, addressed potential respondents as a distinct group: in recognizing themselves in this category, respondents were constructed as a particular kind of authority: the 'amateur expert'. The private pleasures of collecting cinema memorabilia and of having film star expertise is thus given a kind of public importance in such research. In turn, recognition of their 'expertise' could have been perceived to be flattering, and indeed to have set up an expectation that their 'keenness' as cinemagoers in this period had to be demonstrated either through the detail of their accounts, or through an expression of the significance of cinema in their lives.

The request for information about a period at such historical distance also shapes the material received: respondents may feel recognized as a valuable source of historical knowledge, and thus endeavour to give as much information as they could remember. Indeed, the recollection of detail may be one of the pleasures for respondents in participating in audience research. Furthermore,

²⁹ See Kuhn *Mandy* and possibility

³⁰ See Helen Taylor *Scarlett's Women: Gone With The Wind and its Female Fans* (London: Virago, 1989)

suggested academic recognition, or indeed validation, of women's past pleasures in Hollywood cinema, may combine two things rarely taken seriously or given much status: popular culture and its female consumers. In other research, women have expressed shame in their pleasure because they were aware of its low status.³⁰

The kinds of selections respondents make about the cinema of the past will inevitably be framed by the subsequent histories of the cinema. For example, in my own research, which stars were remembered and how they were remembered must have been influenced by the cultural constructions of those stars since that time. Respondents remembered stars differently depending on whether the stars were still alive, and if not, how they had died (Marilyn Monroe) and indeed when they had died (Bette Davis died during the time the questionnaire was being filled in); whether they still had a fan club (Deanna Durbin), whether they had continued to have a successful career (Katharine Hepburn and Bette Davis); whether their films had been shown frequently on television, and, indeed, whether they had gone on to have a television career (Barbara Stanwyck).

In addition to these factors, memories are recollections of the past through changing historical discourses. Assessments of the cinema and its stars will inevitably have been affected by changing notions of acceptable femininity and female sexuality. The different constructions of femininity within Hollywood, such as the power and rebelliousness of Bette Davis or the sexual attractiveness of Marilyn Monroe, or the clean-livingness of Deanna Durbin may have had particular appeal in retrospect and come to mean something over the years which they did not in the 1940s and 1950s. For example, what effect did the 'permissive' 1960s have on discourses of stardom and glamour? To what extent might stars have been reevaluated through a post-sixties understanding of female sexuality? How might women's increased participation in the public sphere have transformed the discourses through which Hollywood's 'independent women' stars have been read? To what extent might the increased visibility of lesbians and gay men in society have encouraged a reevaluation of early 'attachments' to stars of the same sex?

What gets remembered and what gets forgotten may depend not only on the changing discourses (cinematic and otherwise) since the time period specified, but also upon the identity of the cinema spectators themselves. The kinds of representations offered will have been informed by issues such as the respondents' own personal histories. The ways in which their lives had changed, and the feelings they had about their past, present and future selves, will have been amongst the factors determining the memories produced for the purposes of the research.

What I have foregrounded here is the specificity of the production of the memories of the cinema and the conventions through which

knowledge about the past is formed. Rather than seeing these conditions and conventions as *barriers* to 'the real past', as if it existed separately from our retelling of it, I have instead suggested highlighting them as an integral part of the research process. What is important here is to recognize the factors shaping audiences' memories of the cinema and to analyse the conventions through which such material is represented. Thus the general methodological considerations at stake in audience research can be seen to be extended in particular ways with regard to cinema history. Just as all audience research needs to take account of the ways in which knowledge about the cinema is produced within particular discursive configurations, so historical studies of audiences require an analysis of how these processes will be further complicated by the relationship of past and present. And just as narrative conventions of audiences' accounts become part of the study of the consumption of the cinema, so historical studies need to pay attention to the ways in which history is also narrativized.

I began this article with a discussion of why film studies seldom engaged directly with what might be called methodological questions about the object of study within a discipline. In general my aim has been to stimulate more open debate about methodology. My particular sense of urgency about the need for this debate comes from my own experience of doing research on cinema audiences in something of a vacuum. Not only did I find an absence of audience research within film studies, but I found little discussion of the reasons for this absence beyond a rather cursory dismissal of the cinema audience as uninteresting.

In a sense my consideration of methodology here may be seen to contribute to some of the problems I raise. Perhaps it reinforces the assumption that methodology is only of concern to those conducting audience studies, and does little to encourage methodological self-reflection among those studying films as texts. It may seem hard to translate some of the examples I have traced from my own research into general arguments which are of relevance to the textual analysis of films. This intervention can really only be productive if responded to by those working within a variety of methodologies, so that through further dialogue across such positions, we can begin to map the specific methodological terrain of film studies more generally.

Let me make it quite clear that I am not opposed to textual analysis itself, but to the fact that its status as the taken-for-granted method of film studies has not been satisfactorily addressed. After all, textual analysis is *one* of many possible methods, some of which are rarely introduced into film studies. In contrast to television studies, in which, Charlotte Brunsdon has argued, the study of the 'text' has practically disappeared in favour of the study of the audience³¹, film studies continues to assume the 'text' to be the

³¹ See Charlotte Brunsdon 'Text and audience' in Senter et al. *Remote Control*, pp. 116-29.

privileged object of scrutiny. It may well be that many working in film studies would want to justify such a prioritization; but without the relevant methodological debates such a justification often remains invisible and untheorized.

My reason for arguing for the importance of anatomizing methodological issues is that without an open methodological debate orthodoxies become uncontested, texts and methods accrue canonical privilege and disciplinary practices are unthinkingly reproduced. We need methodological issues to be isolated and foregrounded in order to open up crucial, and long overdue, debate in a discipline which now has established itself long enough to risk greater self-reflection.

debate

A conversation with Sally Potter

PENNY FLORENCE

*Sally Potter's career has embraced dance, choreography, performance art and music as well as film and television production. It was with the appearance in 1979 of *Thriller*, however, that her work came to the attention of followers of experimental and independent cinema. This short film (funded by the Arts Council of Great Britain under its 'artists' films' remit), with its deployment of music, spectacle and 'gender performatives' around the central idea of a specifically female quest, soon became a classic of feminist independent cinema, attracting a much broader audience than is usual for avant-garde films. With its dream sequence, dance numbers and improvisations, Potter's next film project, the feature-length *The Gold Diggers* (1983), takes up some of the concerns of *Thriller*, both drawing on and overturning (notably in its refusal to countenance the heterosexual 'boy-meets-girl' narrative contract) conventions of the classical Hollywood musical. After some years of making television programmes and short films, Sally Potter has recently completed the long-awaited film adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel, *Orlando*, which she wrote and directed. She was interviewed by Penny Florence on the eve of *Orlando*'s British release in March 1993*

PF: Is it possible to assess different reactions to *Orlando* internationally?

SP: It's already made the breakthrough into the commercial zone, much to most people's surprise. So that's one kind of assessment.

along with the reviews, of course. And then another kind of assessment is the reaction when you're there as an individual at a premiere: the energy in the cinema, or the laughter. And then it's individual responses and letters. Those are more subtle ways of measuring reaction. The most important, to me, is the feeling of communion through laughter, when you know you've made something unencumbered, and it's just shooting out off the screen into people's hearts and minds.

PF: Regardless of nationality The aspects of it that are very English, the touches of Alice, of Looking-Glass humour, the way you understate your overstatement, even here it seems to have translated well.

SP: It's almost a principle that the more specific you are nationally, or locally, in terms of a story, the more universal it can be. For example, *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio de Sica, 1948) is a totally universal story, but very specific to the time and place of Italy in the Depression. If the underlying themes of a story are universal enough, the specificities are transcended. In *Orlando* I think that other countries get a lot out of the jokes about England. Given British colonial history, it's kind of a relief. I sat through the whole screening in Dublin because I was interested to see where the laughs would be, and all the laughs about Englishness were huge compared with the rest of the film; as with the conversation between Sasha and Orlando in French in screenings in Canada, where the issue about French and English is a big one. So either it's the story itself that's transcending boundaries or it's that other countries' relationship with England is finding recognition or expression within the film.

PF: Do you think that the film's relation with 'English' implies distance, unlike the specificity that reads as parochial? I'm thinking of some of the postmodern conceptualizations of location, the local

SP: It's like being within and without at the same time, not really distanced, but with a wider view. I think it helps that a lot of the rest of the crew were not British. The Dutch designers, Ben Van Os and Jan Roelfs, don't have a reverential attitude to British artefacts and history, they play with a freedom and poetic licence, the French editor, Herve Schneid, slashed right into the scenes very beautifully; and Alexei Rodionov, the Russian cameraman, has a very austere Russian eye. In combination it's European eyes on an English story.

PF: It's a great achievement – in many, many ways – but to have realized such a sense of European historical conviction untainted with the feel of costume drama. . . .

SP: I always said to the design teams: this is not a costume drama, this is not a historical film, it's a film about now that happens to

move through these periods. Research and find out all the things we can and then throw them away. We're going to stylize, we're going to leave out, exclude certain colours or textures or shapes. The usual approach to costume drama is in the genre of realism, where a room is made to look like a room as it is thought to have looked then. But the premise of *Orlando* is that all history is imagined history and leaves out all the most important bits anyway. There are traces of historical information that can be reinterpreted in various ways, so we are in a situation of artifice. So taking this on board and using it as a sort of strength, it was a designed, framed, constructed, imagined whoosh of history, not a recording . . . So I think it's an attitude to realism above all, and then the aesthetic decisions attendant on that choice.

PF: Turning to the complex relationship between the avant garde, the mainstream and the popular, I wonder how you would situate *Orlando*, how much it redefines that relationship for you?

SP: Well, I've always found them meaningless definitions. I'm saying that slightly tongue-in-cheek, but I think that it's worth saying. A much more helpful way of thinking about the different kinds of cinema is that they are really facets of a prism. The film industry consists of blockbusters at one end of the spectrum and two-minute, handheld 8mm epics at the other end and they all feed into each other and it's all part of something called cinema. Now I would hate to situate *Orlando* anywhere other than in the cinema. I want people to go and see it and if other people want to pigeonhole it, they can. In some of its previews it was called Arthouse, but now that's been disproved in the terms that it was intended by the box office figures in European countries. But 'avant garde' is really about being in the forefront, on the cutting edge. It also usually implies a low budget. It usually means that you are somewhat marginalized, functioning on the outside of the culture looking in. Of all those things I would say the budget of what I'm doing is avant garde by American standards, but pretty mainstream by British standards: about two million pounds. I would say being on the outside looking in is certainly how I experience myself. I also experience myself as not English, but then I've gradually learned that an awful lot of other English people experience themselves as not English, too. It's part of the nature of the culture, the class structure, that only a tiny minority experience themselves as the true English, and all the rest are a bunch of foreigners and weirdos.

It's also true that my own history comes out of the avant garde, proudly, and I don't experience myself as having shifted away from it into something else. All of my working life I've thought of myself as part of avant-garde show business. Because my disciplines are the same as those of anyone in show business. My work is the craft, the timing, the sense of audience: reworking, thinking, feeling what this

thing called entertainment is. All that. But it's as if the time in which I emerged was a time when there was a necessity to pull languages apart in order to put them back together again. It's like doing everything the wrong way round. Instead of having a traditional training which you then turn upside-down, I started upside-down and then discovered the meanings of the traditions afterwards. What I've always been clear about, but not always had the skills for, is that the mode that I'm working in is the pleasure mode. The question is how to create the kind of pleasure that's like a wave that can carry with it complexity and ideas and layers of any number of things. But unless it's got the timing, the intoxication of the senses and the kind of heart in it – in other words, all the different structures of pleasure – then it's not going to work anyway. I think that applies to everything the so-called avant garde, the popular, the mainstream. I really listen to audiences I think audiences are there to be learned from, not talked down to. I make a point of watching what I've done with audiences and taking it on the chin. I hate it if they are alienated and walk out. But if they laugh and are moved by it, then they stay; and I try and understand what is happening there. I think it's an acquired skill to match up to what people need and want.

PF: The time you made *Thriller* was, as it were, the anti-pleasure time, the time of theoretical films problematizing pleasure. How do you view that kind of filmmaking now?

SP: I'm proud of *Thriller*. I have many more problems with *The Gold Diggers*, but with *Thriller* I was out on a limb. It was really the first time that I'd managed to pull together the threads from my work of the previous decade in performance, and – I'm hesitating whether to use the phrase 'sexual politics' – also using opera and telling a story. Of course, that's what people have been doing for ever; but at that moment in cinematic history, in the culture I was coming out of, these were bold and radical things to do. It's interesting that *Thriller* has endured. It's still watched by, okay, a very cultish area, but it's still alive, it's never stopped being rented out since it was made

PF: I remember when you were doing the rounds [of independent venues] with *Thriller*, I asked you what you thought about Lacan, and you said you hadn't read Lacan, and I was really impressed! [Laughter] And also surprised That's partly why I wanted to ask you how you see the interface between what's happening in film theory and in filmmaking. It's been a very interesting time over the past fifteen years in theory

SP: Yes, yes.

PF: How would you characterize the interface between theory and the practice of . . . 'avant-garde show business'?

SP: Well, I was probably being a bit disingenuous, but I was trying to contradict what I saw as the misinterpretation of my work generally as having come out of the theoretical movement. It hadn't. It had come out of my practice in performance. But at the same time, I was exposed to some of the thinking around Lacan. I still haven't waded my way through dense Lacan. I've read an awful lot of book jackets, so I can hold down an intelligent conversation about such persons! And I'm familiar, loosely speaking, with the work, but it's not my wellspring. I think that I still would claim that you could be on a desert island and if you addressed yourself deeply to a topic you could arrive at certain conclusions in parallel to French Structuralism, or Maori theories of the self, or whatever. It's about a way of looking. It's just that it's expressed in different languages, of which the language of psychoanalysis is one. What I do feel very clear about, though, is that theory as a prescriptive mode for filmmaking is absolutely deadening. The wellspring has to come from somewhere else, it has to come from practice. Of course there's still a dialectical relationship between theory and practice; but anybody who attempts to work at an illustration of a theoretical position is going to run up against terrible walls.

You have to engage with the nitty gritty, the nuts and bolts of filmmaking. When you learn how to put two pieces of film together and study what is happening in the gap of a cut, you will find out what is happening there without having read a book in your life. You don't have to read somebody else's theories to find out about editing. It's classist. It's a very British thing to feel you only know something if you've been to university. You can know an awful lot and be illiterate. I'm prepared to be very strong about that. There's also another British tendency, which is to do down the intellectuals, to be embarrassed by pure thought, which is the reverse face of exactly the same phenomenon. It's like not giving the life of the mind its true status, which is in relation to experience and the body. It's as if the British are almost as embarrassed about the mind as they are about the body.

PF: Yes, though much current feminist and postmodern thinking sees the mind-body dualism as masculinist Do you still see your work as feminist?

SP: I can't use the word any more because it's become debased. My simple observation is that if I use it, it stops people thinking. They close down. There is a small inner circle, of course, for whom it has a different meaning, but in general usage it seems to cause more problems than it solves. So I now try to find more subtle ways, more indirect or appropriate ways to the individual or the circumstance to express some of those ideas – which in any case have moved on. I don't think that should be thought of in a very sad way. It's not about going into hiding or covering tracks – I mean generally, I'm

not just talking about me now. There's a tendency to move away from using that kind of language. I think it's about being cleverer, more effective, and moving out of a sort of ghetto mentality and away from didacticism, and I don't think any of those things can be bad. And anyway language needs to keep refreshing itself perpetually.

PF: So how do you perceive, now, the particular problems women directors face in the film industry as a whole?

DP: Well, I'm thoroughly against complaining about it. I feel I've done my grieving and mourning and being angry, and the proper place for that is in private. I think that now for me in public the proper thing to do is to model being effective and powerful. But of course it's tough. Though I've never found it tough when I'm actually working. I think the problems are almost entirely about getting the opportunities to attain a position of power through gaining the trust of investors. Getting the money and the opportunities, that's the tough bit.

PF: Your financial package for *Orlando* was pretty nonstandard: you've put together an international coproduction between Italy, Holland, France, Russia and the UK. It is quite an unusual deal.

SP: It is. I had a tremendous ally in my producer, Christopher Sheppard. I think that sometimes women are slower in putting together the support structures that men take for granted. Like: a director needs a producer. You need the best professional talents in the business to support you to make a big film, and you need a wonderful script supervisor, you know, all these things. But the most important person getting a film off the ground is the producer, and Christopher Sheppard was a total ally for me as a director and as a female director – but primarily as a director – and never had anything less than respect for my vision and so on. It's shocking how hard he found it to raise the money on my name. So it became a sort of crusade. The attitude from Europe was probably a bit better than the UK, certainly initially. Interestingly, the first people to commit totally wholeheartedly were the Russians. But finally the people that did commit after the years of rejections were obviously the right ones for the film, and they were great, like Simon Perry at British Screen. Things have changed. I've experienced a definite shift in attitude in the last decade, certainly to me, but generally people have learned . . . well, that female directors are just directors, actually. It's an awfully simple lesson, isn't it?

PF: Yes, but this is a contentious thing to say, really – nevertheless I wonder if you think *Orlando* could have been made by a man, at this moment in history?

SP: You may be right, and I am a woman, but I think when one starts to go down the path to . . .

PF: Essentialism?

SP: Yes, essentialism, thinking that somehow one's gender is somehow manifesting on the screen – that's such a dodgy path to go down that I prefer to take the other tack and say that it makes no difference. But of course consciousness is born of experience, and my experience is as a female. Interestingly, though, in this story I had to imagine myself into male experience, which was a great learner, and it helped me to be more compassionate about the difficulties of being a man – thinking for example about how Orlando has to face the kill-or-be-killed factor and the implications that has for all men. When I was in the States, there were men in the audience who had been through Vietnam, or who had friends who had, who didn't need to go back as far in memory as the World War II. Thinking about the effect that has on every aspect of men's lives – to go through a state of fear, actually. It's a terribly useful exercise, having to imagine yourself into another gender or race or class experience, and suddenly to see the world through those eyes. But tell me why it couldn't have been made by a man.

PF: It's something about – I mean at this historical moment, I should have made that clear – the specifics of the experience of a gendered body. If I can come at this through the ending, which I was interested in. It reminded me of *Coup de foudre/At First Sight* (Diane Kurys, 1984), which is an autobiographical story in which the filmmaker appears in character as a child at the end. The scene at the end of *Orlando*, where the girl child (not a boy as in the book) plays with a camera inflected the film retrospectively in similar ways. As in a lot of current women's writing of all kinds, there is a seeking of autobiographical continuities about what motherhood might mean, or daughterhood, a female genealogy.

SP: You're absolutely right. I must say that sometimes when I read, for example, interviews with Spike Lee, I almost envy his ability to say, 'I am black, and this has been what it's like for me'. I feel at this historical moment it's not right for me to say, 'I am female and this has been what it's like for me'. It's almost as if I have to say, well, I'm neither male nor female – it seems to be stronger. There's a hidden dimension to that, of course there is. Every image in the film is imbued with every female bone in my body. And why did I change it from being a boy child in the book to a girl child in the film, and why is that girl holding a camera? Of course, if I really reveal my true heart, it's all of our daughters, or it's me, or our futures, and so on.

PF: One of the reasons I watched it with tears running down my face was that apart from a very powerful individual response, it was also about where I locate in culture, it was a sense of European

culture in which I felt there was a recognition that is for me usually missing

SP: Hurray! That's a word I love. Recognition. That's my intention, to create on screen that sense of recognition of the self, of the hidden or unspoken self, giving voice to something that's been unspoken or suppressed in some way. Rendering visible.

PF: Could that sense have been there without motherhood, without Orlando being there as a mother? What does it mean to the ending that she's the mother of a daughter?

SP: It's a good question because in my numerous rewrites of this film, which went into twenty or so, the ending was one part that I must have rewritten hundreds of times. I kept rewriting it. First of all she didn't have a child, then she did have a child; and I was all too aware that this was a mirror of my own dilemmas around motherhood and all of our generation's dilemmas around motherhood. But the reason I chose the ending finally as it was is that although it's personal to me, it's not strictly speaking autobiographical. I could be a mother, but I'm not. But many women are and will be, and there will be another generation of daughters, and so the issue is much more about the future and continuity and literally inheritance. The whole of the rest of the film up to that point is determined by, if you like, the male line of inheritance, the property-owning classes and all the rest of it. At the end there is another kind of inheritance that becomes possible. I'm certainly well aware of how I'm standing on my mother's shoulders and grandmother's shoulders – what I was able to do that they weren't able to do, what they gave to me, and what was taken from them. I think that sense is there in the last seconds of the film without having to be stated as such. The only fact that is stated is the fact of motherhood. And the daughter is in the electronic age, wielding the camera and seeing what she sees: so there is a kind of drive into the vision of the future without actually saying what it is.

PF: Including that wonderful camp image of Jimmy Somerville as an angel

SP: He is an angel!

PF: In the 'Great Queer Wave' women are conspicuous by our absence, still I would imagine that *Orlando* could impact quite a lot on that. How would you feel about its appropriation into the context of 'queer' cinema?

SP: Very hard to say. There is the fact that the book draws on, at its core, Virginia Woolf's love for another woman, Vita Sackville-West. I think that feeling of love is in the film. I think, however, just as Virginia Woolf took a step away from her source material,

which is really what Vita was, and transformed Vita's life into a novel. the film takes several steps away from the book. But I think that Virginia Woolf's notion of the androgynous mind and dissolving gender boundaries is still there. But whilst there is a Sapphic thread, if you like, to the whole book, it's not really within the queer wave, or the lesbian and gay cinema movement as it is now perceived. I think it is about a more polymorphous sexuality rather than specific sexual identities. I don't think the book so much explores sexual identities as dissolves them, and it's that kind of melting and shifting where nothing is ever what it seems for male or female that I think is the strength of the book and which I wanted to reproduce in the film.

PF: The issue arises most clearly around figures like Jimmy Somerville or Quentin Crisp – cast against gender . . . which works wonderfully. You must have been aware that it will be read as making a statement about the life of an artist like him.

SP: Sure, yes, but with Quentin, there are so many ways in which he's right for the part of Queen Elizabeth I, from physical resemblance onwards to the fact that he is the Queen of Queens, the true royal of England, and persecuted. the Englishman in exile *par excellence*. For me part of the secret pleasure of casting Quentin was restoring to him his true status as an iconic figure on the cultural scene. When I was in New York recently he was talking about death and dying, and I thought I might not see him again. I went down on one knee in front of him and said, 'Quentin, you are loved and revered. Thank you for all you have given to us.' So it's partly like that. I wanted to restore dignity and status to some great figures of our cultural scene who have been stamped on or misinterpreted.

PF: When it was on at the Sundance Festival, did people read such presences in terms of 'queer'?

SP: They were remarkably relaxed about that, actually. They were mostly treating the film as a cinematic experience. They went crazy for it. But nobody had heard of me, most people hadn't heard of Tilda Swinton, they just didn't understand where this thing had arrived from, and that was fun to watch. I think that on both woman and gay issues – mostly they were using the word gay rather than queer – there was a kind of relief because it seemed as if the film was dealing with them in a non-attacking way. Everyone seemed to feel recognized in their own way, whether gay, straight or whatever the labels are, and I think that was a relief. It was as if nobody had to feel guilt for who or what they were. The film seemed to relax tension about identity rather than increase it.

PF: Orlando changes sex and says, 'No difference at all, just a

different sex', but then the film plays out how it *does* matter: the reasons why women's experience is different is how we relate to property.

SP: Well we are owned: traditionally, as females, we *are* the property I think that maybe the film is about a sort of innocence or human essence, a transcendental sense of being which goes beyond gender or the property line, inheritance and so forth; that those are in a sense masks or irrelevances. Ultimately people are born and die naked, without property, and the sooner we realize that the better. Especially in times of recession all notions of ownership and security become revealed for the absurdities they are anyway. But this particular story is about the English and their relationship to property – colonialism is a constant subtext of the film – and the way that women become inexorably entangled in that story. But you know I think the film really does also try to recognize how complex and layered we are as persons, from the material and physical and emotional through to the spiritual. It tries to find a language to express the inexpressible. The 'it doesn't matter' is about the search for the essential.

PF: But it matters in the sense that the material inflects very greatly how that . . .

SP: It matters very, very much. But it is a paradox because in a way it doesn't matter at all.

reports

11th Pordenone Silent Film Festival, 11–18 October 1992

There are many ways to see films in Pordenone, but in order to survive and appreciate the experience one should not be overcome by visual greed and curiosity, because one week of about twelve hours screenings of silent pictures a day is very demanding. One can pick and choose, trying to get a taste of everything; or follow one or two threads; or be very faithful to only one of the main events. And yet, whatever one does, somebody will always say that you missed the rediscovery of the century . .

Actually the Pordenone festival works because of the variety of offerings, which represent answers to the different needs developed by different historiographic projects. You can follow the origins and developments of national cinemas (German, Scandinavian, Russian, Yugoslavian, and so on) or debuts and careers of silent picture masters (De Mille, Genina, Bauer, etc.); there is always a niche for comedy, considered a key genre in the elaboration of film language, or the recuperation of 'lost' Italian pictures, which have enabled the rewriting of an entire chapter of Italian film history, given that most of these films were thought to have disappeared. An essential element in the selection process, however, should be a restraint on the kind of intellectual consumerism associated with film festivals, which includes an inclination to scoop-writing. It is not necessary to discover a new master or new masterpieces, or reverse the canons all the time. It is important, however, to learn how to take advantage of this precious assemblage of material, which dissolves at the end of the event. And it is advisable to appreciate a philological reconstruction of a print without a maniacal

obsession for *incunabula*. To really appreciate the experience in Pordenone, one has to mix the characters of a film archivist, a film buff and a scholar, but keep one foot solidly in History.

The latest event, mainly devoted to the silent work of Frank Borzage, also included 'Lightning Images' Société Eclair, 1907–1918'; 'Walt in Wonderland', that is, early Disney animated pictures with live action; 'East to West' Treasures From the Komya Collection of Tokyo', that is, rare prints, often coloured; a selection of Italian divas such as Duse in *Cenere* (1916), Francesca Bertini in *Beatrice d'Este* (1912), Soava Gallone in *Nemesis* (1920), Maria Jacobini in *Richiamo di Gennaro Righelli* (1921), and a variety of other offerings

In addition to the screenings, the festival featured two exhibits: 'Commerce for Art's Sake – Selling the Movies, 1896–1926', by David Robinson, on the evolution of film publicity; and 'Trip to the Movies: Georges Méliès, Filmmaker and Magician (1861–1938)', by Paolo Cherchi Usai, which used rare photographic material on Méliès sets (also published as a catalogue). In fact, as usual the festival published very useful books: on early Disney by Russell Merritt and J. B. Kaufman; on Eclair 1907–1918 by Henri Bousquet and Laurent Mannoni, an issue of *Griffithiana*, entitled *Hollywood's Lucky Star*, which contained important contributions on Borzage by Herve Dumont (who has written the definitive book on the director, published on the occasion of the recent homage to Borzage at the French Cinémathèque); and by Richard Kszarski, Harrison Haskins, Peter Milne and Davide Turconi. All these books are bilingual, and more often than not Pordenone titles are, and remain, the only sources on certain periods or aspects of silent cinema

The last day of the festival this year featured a conference on Eclair, chaired by Richard Abel, with presentations by Steven Higgins, Donald Crafton, Peter Lehman,

Richard Abel, Tom Gunning, Eric Le Roy, Thierry Lefebvre, Laurent Mannoni, Henri Bousquet, Philippe Esnault, and Francis Lacassin. Eclair made *mélos larmoyants* which anticipated the social problem pictures, serials starring Nick Carter, Zigomar, Protéa and directed by Victorin-Hyppolyte Jasset (the pre-Feuillade master of serials), and comedies with Gavroche and Gontran; American Eclair at Fort Lee employed Maurice Tourneur. But, in my opinion, this was one of those occasions in which film history confirms the validity of classical canons: Pathé was better than Eclair (as much as a previous festival demonstrated that Vitagraph was not as interesting as other companies of the time . . .).

The big popular events at Pordenone are films with an orchestra. This year we had *Seventh Heaven* (1927) with a new score by Paul Robinson played by Harmonie Band; *Gardiens de phare* by Jean Gremillon (1929) with a new score written and performed by Richard McLaughlin and his group; and the much-acclaimed adaptation of Carl Mayer's *Sylvester* by Lupu Pick (1923) with percussion instruments by Jermano and Martinelli, which was probably the most innovative and intelligent accompaniment, with its touch of experimentalism which went well with the claustrophobic atmosphere of the film. The usual sequence of the best silent picture-piano players from around the world accompanied the other pictures.

Frank Borzage won the first Academy Award, for *Seventh Heaven*, and was elected best director, bypassing Ford and Stroheim, in a survey of the late twenties. And yet he has not received the critical attention he deserved. Pordenone (and later the Cinémathèque) have made up for this. From a historiographic point of view, Borzage represents for me the missing link between Griffith and American melodrama of the forties and fifties. His silent films move from the Victorian world of Griffith, inhabited by

ingenuous girls, easy prey to corrupted males coming from the tentacular modern city (*Life Harmony* [1916]), towards a confusion of sexual roles, disguised in diseases and disablements, which express metaphorically the sickness of the soul in its uneasy relation to the body and to sexuality. Female protagonists are often girls, pure in their souls if not in their bodies, who reveal unexpected spiritual gifts, moral vigour and all the variations of cardinal virtues, while the male hero's physical strength is seriously compromised by mutilations, wounds, sicknesses. The stories tend to a gradual spiritualization of the characters, but it is a spirituality which is religious without being confessional. (Borzage abandoned the Catholicism of his half-Italian family to adhere to masonic rites.)

That Borzage was a master of melodrama was well known: what the first part of his career reveals is that he was also a good director of action films, and of comedy. His experiences as an actor, a miner and a cowboy, his performances for Ince's company (he made about thirty films as an actor, in good part Westerns and comedies) leave clear traces in his directorial work at Flying A and Mustang. He shows already a great ability in directing actors, imposing an acting style which is very naturalistic, notwithstanding his training as a theatrical actor. In some of these pictures, he also expands the geographic and thematic limits of the Western in order to include Canada, mines, automobiles, Indian wives and an unusual Southern California. In *Nuggett Jim's Pardner* (1916) he introduces the typical Borzage hero (played by the director himself): free and easy, vitalist, and yet attached to healthy principles, showing a degree of ethical quality and spirituality unexpected in action films. An interesting variation of this character appears in *Until They Get Me* (1917), a Western of incredible modernity both in acting style and story. This film contains another Borzagean theme: the

relation between an older, solitary, silent and rough man, and a girl, who blooms into her sexuality on the screen, disturbing the hero, as in the very unusual *Lazybones* (1925), in which a man who has adopted a girl considers marrying her.

Pictures where women are the protagonist are different. These characters follow all the turns of an itinerary of redemption: from the boardwalk, where they literally stand, as in *The Lady* (1925), to a (relatively) upper class, love and happiness, and down again, lonely, in the gutters. It is a typically melodramatic structure – a closed circle, which inexorably returns to where it started. These women sacrifice everything for the man they love, even their children, but never their own pride, their own sense of honour, in a form of love which is never sensual, not even when the play of seduction is the key theme of the picture. There is an exception – a lucky rediscovery although an incomplete print – *The River* (1928). In this picture, a woman, Mary Duncan, who wears languid satin pyjamas or low-necked silk gowns under suggestive kimonos (even during snow storms in a cabin deep in the woods!) tries to seduce Charles Farrell, who emerges naked from the turbulent waters of the river. An intense erotic tension explodes between the two, always repressed. The climax is represented by a scene in which she opens her dressing gown, trimmed with fur, and lays on top of the young man, frozen to death because he was cutting 'enough wood to keep her warm'. This gesture brings him back to life – a typical example of Borzage's dialectic tension between the woman and the mother where sex is transubstantiated into sublime love. It is interesting to note how some of these textual operations act as metaphors and displacements of a sensuality which it was still possible to communicate explicitly, given that the Hays Code had not yet been written. It was perhaps this reservoir of narrative conventions developed in the silent period from which filmmakers of

the thirties drew, in order to make use of an already structured system of metaphors, especially in melodrama.

Another typical trait of melodrama – repetition – is fully integrated in Borzage's style: every frame has a twin, every gesture is echoed by a similar gesture; composition is made of careful variations of similar shots, as can be seen in *Seventh Heaven*, where the magical encounter of the separated lovers in their attic, is a – very moving – alternation of identical shots and sounds.

One can lament an excess of sentimentality, which is also a constituent of melodrama; but it is, at its best, such an excessive display of feelings that it becomes cathartic – for example, in *Street Angel* (1928) Gino runs after Angela up to the altar of a church where, disillusioned and angry, he wants to strangle her, when he looks up and sees the portrait of Angela, transformed into a madonna by a Neapolitan art dealer. Often the sublime is just a step away from the ridiculous, especially in a cinema which is so connected to the coeval system of values and behaviour, in an unstable equilibrium between Victorianism and modernity. And yet Borzage makes you laugh only when he has decided to.

Giuliana Muscio

Silent Screen, Live Sounds: A Symposium on Music and Silent Film, University of Chicago, 6 February 1993

Illustrative of this symposium is the fact that three of the six presenters sang at one point or another in their papers. Combined with the day's more formal music/film performances – including a screening of the reconstructed *Intolerance* (1916) accompanied by orchestra – these nontransparent, nontraditional uses of film-scholarly voices worked to draw sound out of the

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'background' of the image in (silent) film studies. By its end, the conference had consolidated questions about the object(s) of film study, suggested new directions and resources for research, and forged links between workers from different disciplines and milieux – film and music, the university and the archive, research and performance

Claudia Gorbman and Tom Gunning began by generalizing and contextualizing issues of sound in film. Gorbman surveyed the continuities and discontinuities between 'musico-visual regimes' from silent film to television, noting the 'tenacity' of music as a representational system across these regimes, but also noting the differing functions of music in each regime; in particular, Gorbman argued that music in television serves to 'hail' the spectator in ways it does not in either silent or sound cinema. Gunning explored the differences between recorded sound and the 'performance sound' that accompanied silent films. Because performance sound was controlled by exhibitors, often constituted the majority of the program and allowed for audience involvement, it came to signify the 'liveness' and 'immediacy' that many early observers felt the silent image lacked – a signification that sound has carried, underexplored by scholars, well into the era of recording.

The middle of the day was dedicated to case studies. Richard Schwegel outlined the Chicago Public Library's Balaban and Katz Theatre Orchestra Collection¹ and used it to illustrate Balaban and Katz's ideal of 'blending' drama, music, and film into a 'total entertainment experience' for their Chicago movie palaces. Extending her work on movie-going in Chicago's 'Black Metropolis',² Mary Carbine detailed music's very different function in the entertainment experiences found in silent movie theatres in Chicago's African-American communities, showing how jazz was used not to create a 'total experience' but rather to discompose Hollywood illusion and assert African-

American identities.

In the afternoon and evening, conferees considered issues surrounding the historical reconstruction of silent film music performance. Gillian Anderson of the Library of Congress described conducting Joseph Carl Breil's original score for *Intolerance* and limned the multiple contingencies – the 'room', the quality of musicians, audience expectations, current events – that inhere in and impinge upon contemporary receptions of silent film, though she touched too lightly on the methods and logic of her efforts (along with Peter Williamson of MOMA) to reconstruct the premiere version of the film.³ Martin Marks accompanied – spectacularly – *His People* (1925) on piano and then explained how he generated an historically acute 'compiled' score for the film by combining careful research with the (necessarily) subjective goal of creating a 'malleable tone-poem as a frame for the picture'.

For the grand finale – *Intolerance* – Anderson led a chamber orchestra and chorus through the incessant tempo changes of Breil's cut-and-paste score with rhythmic precision that added still more drive to D. W. Griffith's editing. The still frames that substituted sections of the film lost by Griffith's notorious reediting were sometimes distracting, especially before the pace of the intersecting stories had been well established; but at other times, especially in the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre, the stills were uncannily effective, providing the visual equivalent of the powerful silences that punctuated the score – silences intended, perhaps, to represent intolerance itself.

Debate at the symposium was lively and open-ended: what are the continuities between musico-visual regimes; how does music signify in silent film; how important was the film relative to the music in various exhibition contexts, what are the rules for and the purposes of historical reconstruction? It would be useful if the Chicago Humanities

Institute and Chicago's Film Studies Center collaborated again a few years hence to hold a second instalment of this symposium and air some of the work that is certain to come from this one.

Arthur Knight

- 1 This is a holding of 840 boxes of material much of which is catalogued on computer – though not online – and open to researchers. Interested researchers can obtain more information by contacting Richard Schwegel at The Harold Washington Library Center Music Information Center 400 South State Street Chicago Illinois 60605 USA Phone (312) 747-4805 fax (312) 747-4832
- 2 Mary Carbine 'The Finest Outside the Loop' motion picture exhibition in Chicago's Black Metropolis 1905-1928 *Camera Obscura* no. 23 (1990), pp. 9-41
- 3 For an explanation and criticism of this reconstruction see Russell Merritt, 'D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance*: reconstructing an unattainable text' *Film History* vol. 4, no. 4 (1990), pp. 337-75

Créteil's 15th International Women's Film Festival, 26 March-4 April 1993

The festival at Créteil has, like feminism itself, come a long way in its fifteen-year evolution. The last five years have seen it struggle, whilst wandering between the radical and commercial, accused of both selling out and becoming stuck in a ghetto. In 1993 Créteil chose to pause in a moment of self-reflection, which produced two main changes.

Firstly, reflecting upon the festival's status as a meeting place for theory and practice, there was real space allocated for discussion. Whilst more effort was made to ensure that directors were present to meet their public

after the screening of their films, the main innovation came in the form of two half-day conferences. Co-organized by Ginette Vincendeau and Bérénice Reynaud to coincide with the publication of a collection of Anglo-American articles, translated into French for the first time, *20 ans de théories féministes sur le cinéma*, the two conferences offered the chance for discussion between British, American and French theorists, students and cinephiles. The chosen speakers were Jackie Stacey and Laura Mulvey from Britain, and Giuliana Bruno, Ella Shohat and Yvonne Rainer from the USA (all of whom had articles in the publication). The discussion included subjects such as female authorship, female spectatorship and the possibility of a female aesthetic, as well as the representation of the female body in the cinema. Whilst certain questions were posed, the aim of the conferences was not to provide any fixed answers; rather, what became most evident was the multiplicity of present feminist theory and the wealth of approaches now employed, from the psychoanalytic and historical to the multicultural and scientific.

The second product of Créteil's self-reflection concerned its choice of films. Along with the twenty long and twenty-seven short films in competition, the second part of 'Les Européennes' and the 'Auto-portrait' (this year presented by Monica Vitti), space was given for sections which looked back (into Créteil's history) and forward, to future areas of discussion for the festival. Included in the first category was a section on Canadian filmmakers, a gesture of respect to a national cinema which was one of the first to invest in Créteil's cause in its formative years. The second category centred on a collaboration between Créteil and a French group 'Femmes et Changements', whose concern is the role women play in issues related to the environment, development and social change. Entitled 'Rio-Créteil-Pékin', this section also widened Créteil's discourses

Institute and Chicago's Film Studies Center collaborated again a few years hence to hold a second instalment of this symposium and air some of the work that is certain to come from this one.

Arthur Knight

- 1 This is a holding of 840 boxes of material much of which is catalogued on computer – though not online – and open to researchers. Interested researchers can obtain more information by contacting Richard Schwegel at The Harold Washington Library Center Music Information Center 400 South State Street Chicago Illinois 60605 USA Phone (312) 747-4805 fax (312) 747-4832
- 2 Mary Carbine 'The Finest Outside the Loop' motion picture exhibition in Chicago's Black Metropolis 1905-1928 *Camera Obscura* no. 23 (1990), pp. 9-41
- 3 For an explanation and criticism of this reconstruction see Russell Merritt, 'D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance*: reconstructing an unattainable text' *Film History* vol. 4, no. 4 (1990), pp. 337-75

Créteil's 15th International Women's Film Festival, 26 March-4 April 1993

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on a formal level, through the use of work on video.

Having presented her first short film at last year's festival, Karne Saporta, choreographer and photographer, returned with her own selection of films, which she called '*La Vision interdite*' (The Forbidden Vision). Like many of Créteil's special sections, this selection concentrated upon pioneers of the cinema, past and present, yet was different in its emphasis upon more experimental work which escaped the tyranny of narrative through the incorporation of dance (Pina Bausch, Meredith Monk), abstraction and pattern (Germaine Dulac), poetry (Marguerite Duras, Maya Deren), or a dominant personal style (Yvonne Rainer, Chantal Akerman). This being the case, the section offered a well received alternative to the auteur cinema so visibly promoted in the long competition entries.

The multiplicity of voices informing present feminist film theory was equally evident in this year's selection of films, whether through their themes, approaches or forms. The selection of the long fiction and documentary films, in particular, seemed a careful attempt on Créteil's part to extend its representation of contemporary women's cinema (a term meant to refer in this case to films directed by women), even to the extent of including a generic film *Tales of a Vampire* (1991) made in Britain by a Japanese, Shimako Sato.

In the short films, the treatment of serious issues such as incest or adoption was often compromised by both the restricted duration and the overemphasis upon formal innovation. *Idole Mio* (Barbara Marheineke, Germany 1991) winner of the public prize in this section, managed to treat a serious issue – the influence of advertising upon the way women eat – with much humour and insight. Thus, we watch a plasticine woman take to various diets which change her body accordingly: the carrot diet (she becomes a rabbit), the fish diet (she develops a beak),

and finally, when all else fails, she resorts to cutting off her flesh and stitching herself into a more desirable shape. Some of the most successful short films gave an ironic look at two of women's social roles: the housewife and the sex object. In *Sexy Girls, Sexy Appliances* (Emma-Kate Crogan, Australia, 1991) sexual pleasure is collapsed with household tasks as, clad in the sexy underwear of pin-up girls, the models sit on vibrating spin dryers, chop up phallus-shaped vegetables and squeeze condoms onto vacuum cleaners. Household chores, then, become sexual activities, and the stereotypes which man has created for his own sexual pleasure escape their roles through ironic appropriation.

The Invisible Hand (Athina Tsoulis, New Zealand, 1992) approaches this subject from a different angle. As a high-powered executive masturbates to a dirty phone call, we are shown the woman on the other end of the line, nonchalantly peeling her potatoes. This self-reflexive use of images of traditional woman's roles was at work in many of Créteil's films this year, echoing the festival's own process of self-reflection, and allowing it to work through its shifting historical identities.

Two documentaries in competition insisted upon placing themselves very much outside the patriarchal order described in the shorts above, dealing instead with the idea of a lesbian community. Dominique Cardona and Laurie Colbert's *Thank God I'm a Lesbian* (Canada, 1992), winner of the public prize, was a celebration of difference within the margins, insisting upon the need to acknowledge multiplicity, whilst at the same time, through the joy and glee associated with openness and coming out, pursuing its project of raising a political consciousness for any form of marginality.

Barbara Hammer's *Nitrate Kisses* (USA, 1992) takes a more historical approach to the subject. It is Hammer's fiftieth film and her first feature, and like *Thank God* . . . it too

splinters all notions of a coherent gay community, whilst formally breaking visual taboos around the portrayal of sexual practices, ultimately to challenge the genre of the 'straight' revisionist documentary. The soundtrack recounts the problem of creating a lesbian herstory when so many figures will not speak (the particular example being women in World War II concentration camps), and others have been wrongly spoken for. These oral histories are visually complemented by a montage of lesbian novellas, interviews, quotes, and longer sequences of love-making. The first sequence is of a lesbian couple in their seventies. The intimate camera creates a tactile language with which to 'read' the history of these bodies written in lines, folds and sagging skin. The possible interpretation of this love-making as a defining entity, is split through further scenes of two men, one black and one white, and two younger lesbian couples, one of which practice sadomasochism. Mixing past and present with that which was formerly absented and made invisible, *Nitrate Kisses* is a film which defies a conclusion, preferring rather to initiate a herstory which is then set in perpetual motion.

Making present the her in history was also the theme of a fiction film in competition, *Valsi Pecorazi/A Waltz on the Edge of the Petchora* (Lana Gogoberidze, Georgia, 1992). Set in the Soviet Union of 1937 the film tells two stories, firstly that of a thirteen-year-old girl who, on escaping from an orphanage, returns to her former home to find it inhabited by a KGB officer; and secondly, that of the girl's mother who, considered too weak for hard labour since she is an intellectual, is condemned to wander the Petchora in north Russia. The film plays with passages between the fictitious and the documentary, the complex narrative and the scene, historic footage reminiscent of the train films at the beginning of cinema develop into images with colour and narrative slowly draining into them. Women

direct their monologues to the world, the spectator, to themselves. At its most beautiful moment a white forest of Arden is created momentarily in the snow with an all woman cast, a Vienna waltz of pure joy and companionship which the daughter shares through her own dance around a Christmas tree. Overshadowing all of these glimpses of female bonding and community, however, is the economic dominance of the man, either in the form of the hunter, who observes the outcast women in the snow, denying them their nourishment, or the officer in the flat recuperating the male spectator's position at the threshold and claiming the dance as a spectacle for himself.

Having emphasized the dominance of 'women' in this year's festival, whether through a preoccupation with women's issues, her place in history, or appropriation of the narrative form, it is interesting that the long fiction film which won the vote of both the jury and the public centred upon a duologue between two men. Made by Swedish Suzanne Osten (whose *Broderna Mozart* also won the public prize in 1987), *Tala! Det Ar Sa Morkt/Speak, it's Getting Dark* (1992), tells of the meeting of a neo-Nazi and a Jewish doctor. After treating Soren for a cut on the head incurred during a racist attack to which he was a witness, Jacob invites him to visit on a weekly basis. The classic situation of the psychoanalyst and the patient is invoked in a series of duologues which takes place in an increasingly emptied room, the significance of which, as a thinking/talking space, is emphasized by its contrast to Soren's own cluttered bedroom, forever filled with fascist music and neo-Nazi propaganda. The representation of two enemies: the Nazi and Jew, is combined with a further series of dichotomies: the physical/the verbal, the group mentality/the individual thinker; yet the film's project is neither to stereotype, nor to (psycho)analyse, but rather to understand. Thus, after climaxes on both the verbal level (an argument in which

Sören tries to convince Jacob that Auschwitz never actually existed), and the physical (a fight between the two men), both seem to have invested a little in the enemy, and this fact is reflected in the final image in which Sören's smile, finally breaks through his facade of hate.

Most of our discussion of the festival has been refracted through the distanced theoretical gaze of academia, which necessarily attempts to link film practice with film theory. However, several of this year's films, whilst neatly fitting into the category of a reclamation of history for the her, refuse to be fixed in conventional unemotional prose. The documentary films of both Helke Sander (*Befreier und Befreite/The Liberator and the Liberated* [Germany, 1991–2]) and Deepa Dhanraj (*Something Like a War* [India, 1992]) winner of the jury prize, 'affect' through their return to a feminist politics which emphasizes shared experiences through shared bodies. Helke Sander's film presents a counterside of history left well alone in the patriarchal narrative of World War II – the

rape of women, east and west. Deepa Dhanraj pursues a similar line of enquiry, showing the suffering of Indian women, which is the subtext to the official statistics on birth control and family planning, allocated as strategies to fight social injustice in India. Whilst the situations are very specific and thus could allow a detached spectator, the centrality of the female body in both films, graphically presented as mutilated (by Sander) and the site of injustice (by Dhanraj) ensures a more emotional, even physical involvement, by female spectators at least. In common with many of the films at Créteil in 1993, these two documentaries testify to the fact that there are still many stories to be told, gaps to be filled and voices to be listened to. Hopefully the result of 1993's moment of reflection will be a renewed effort by Créteil to embrace an increasingly wide selection of countries, cultures, subjects and, in short, women.

Cathy Fowler and Petra Kuppers

reviews

review:

David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, 334 pp.

GEOFFREY NOWELL-SMITH

David Bordwell has some straightforward ideas about the cinema. He believes, for example, that understanding and enjoying a film is largely a matter of making inferences from cues provided by the text. He also believes that understanding film criticism is a matter of making inferences from cues provided by the critical text. Films he regards as poetic texts, so that the sort of cues they contain and the inferences that can legitimately be made from them need to be examined under the heading of Poetics. Criticism, however, is best studied under the heading of Rhetoric, since it is the rhetorical disposition of the critic's arguments that needs to be put under scrutiny.

In the light of these straightforward, but far from simpleminded beliefs, Bordwell sets out in *Making Meaning* to look at the rhetoric and the logic (or lack of it) at work in various forms of recent film criticism – some of them journalistic but most of them academic, some naive but others pretentious. He is mildly acerbic about procedures such as the personification of the camera as an extension of the director's mind, but shows real animosity – thinly disguised under a patina of neutrality – towards recently fashionable forms of interpretation such as 'symptomatic reading'. This should come as no surprise to readers acquainted with Bordwell's earlier work, such as *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985), but the position taken here is both more rigorous and in some ways more nuanced.

Interpretation as such is in fact the target of much of his argument, and *Against Interpretation* would perhaps have been a better title for the book, were it not already the name of a justly famous essay by Susan Sontag

With much of what Bordwell says, both in general and in particular, I find it hard not to agree. There is a lot of dubious interpretation around and certain interpretive practices, originally thought of as exploratory, have fossilized into orthodoxy. But the problem has escalated to its present level not because the interpretive models in use are intellectually disreputable, but because of the nature of the film studies institution on the one hand and the political impasse of the academic left on the other: between them these have led to certain practices being favoured as models of virtue. I therefore want to express disagreement with Bordwell on two counts. Firstly, I believe there is an intellectual and political case for the kind of interpretation he finds anathema – though I would admit that this case is greatly weakened by the proliferation of interpretations which do nothing to advance it. And secondly, I think that the institutional corrective needed by film studies does not lie – or does not *just* lie – in a return to the rigours of what he calls ‘historical poetics’, but involves a wider rethinking of the objectives and potential of studying the cinema.

Let us start, however, with an area of agreement: the need to look at (and listen to) films in the light of what they do, and not always what this might imply in terms of a hidden or not so hidden meaning. I agree with Bordwell that practices such as symptomatic reading distract attention from the properly aesthetic level of the film text. A kind of aesthetic puritanism comes into play whereby formal questions are discussed only in order to shift attention to another level of content. Formal elements are required to have ‘meaning’, and this meaning has to be the meaning of some ‘thing’ – often an ‘ism’ – that the critic regards as serious and important. Films therefore become interesting in so far as they treat of masochism, say, or orientalism, to the detriment of an understanding of how they operate as films. Criticism remains obstinately interpretive, looking for levels of meaning below the surface; and it remains content-based because what lies below the surface – what is latent as opposed to manifest – is always just another form of content.

Like Bordwell, I would like to see more writing which avoids the trap of contentistic interpretation, which is not afraid to look at films direct without always seeking a hidden agenda. Such writing need not be morally or politically frivolous, as many people seem to fear, indeed it might encourage the head-on confrontation of major issues, instead of eternally displacing them somewhere else. Examples of noncontentistic writing would include some of Bordwell’s own work, most notably his book on Ozu,¹ and (perhaps

1 David Bordwell *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (London: British Film Institute and Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988)

- 2 Sam Rohdie *Antonioni* (London: British Film Institute, 1990)
 Roland Barthes 'Cher Antonioni' *Cahiers du cinema* no. 311
 (1980) first published in Italian as 'Caro Antonioni' in *Bologna incontri* no. 2 (1980)

- 3 This is not to endorse the argument that a film is not a text and therefore cannot – or should not – be read. On the contrary: as popular usage recognizes, anything can be read: maps tealeaves messages from air traffic control (Do you read me?) but all these cases imply a semiotic engagement which treats the object as a text and the text as having a code. The more highly coded a film the more appropriate (and necessary) it is to read it. But scrutinizing a film for its messages and the codes through which to locate them is only one form of possible attention to it and not necessarily the most important.

more contentiously) Sam Rohdie's recent book on Antonioni and the wonderful short text by Roland Barthes, 'Cher Antonioni', which Rohdie cites approvingly in his introduction.² For Rohdie, as for Barthes, the importance of Antonioni – his significance as a modern artist and the reason why his films require to be *seen* – does not and cannot lie in the meaning, latent or manifest, of the things Antonioni's films 'say'. If there is a discourse of meaning immanent in Antonioni's films, it has to do with the way meaningfulness of the ordinary kind is suspended and the spectator is invited to experience a certain absence of meaning at times where one would normally expect a plenitude. But it does not follow from this that the films are 'about' absence, or loss, or alienation, or any of the things they are normally described as being about. The task of criticism therefore cannot, in this instance, be one of uncovering meanings, since they are simply not there to be uncovered. It is rather one of producing a parallel text which does not interpret the films but elicits from them a sense of what they are doing and what is to be seen in them. This procedure is not interpretation; nor should it be called reading, since reading is also a semiotic process aimed at determining meaning.³

This does not mean, however, that there is no place for interpretation in film criticism. Nor do I agree with Bordwell as to what should replace it. Bordwell concedes that there is a place for interpretation within his historical poetics in the case of works which rely on an explicit allegorical code, assumed to be shared at least in principle between addresser and addressee. Dante's journey to the centre of the earth and out again in the *Divine Comedy* has to be interpreted also as a journey of the human soul, as explicated in textbooks of the time. Such elaborate allegories are rare in the cinema and in twentieth-century art generally, but characters in movies nevertheless journey to the centre of the earth, or into outer space, or across deserts, and these journeyings have all sorts of metaphorical (and even allegorical) connotations for spectators to latch onto. In the case of science fiction, the possibility of allegorical interpretation is never far from the surface, and is sanctioned by the generally accepted rules of the genre. In the case of other films which make use of the journey form – *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), *Two-Lane Blacktop* (Monte Hellman, 1971), *North by Northwest* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959), *The Sheltering Sky* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1990) – the possible metaphorical structure is both less rigid and less immediately apparent, but is nevertheless the object of legitimate enquiry, if only because spectators share (with the filmmakers) a certain set of assumptions and inferential models for associating one meaning with another.

The problem comes when we pass from the realm of allegory and fixed metaphor, which can be the object of conventional agreement within a culture, to that of the fluid metaphor present in, for

example, the horror film. The general conventions of the genre (and its subgenres) are known and explicit and could be adequately described by most teenagers. But the metaphorical structure of horror is not so easily established, since it is governed not only by convention but by unconscious mental processes as well. Some of the metaphor is open to interpretation in a political-ideological mode, but far more has to do with the tortuous processes of representing sex and gender, an area in which meaning is not only fluid but subject to distortion through repression and other mechanisms of psychic defence. To understand the horror film, one has to have recourse to Freud.

Or maybe not. Bordwell would clearly rather not. Methodologically he would prefer to see a film criticism which did not depend on ideas imported from alien disciplines and subject to validation on criteria extrinsic to film poetics itself. And in so far as a psychology of film is necessary, he would rather it was founded on cognitive science than on psychoanalysis. However, both the exclusion of psychoanalysis and the prospective inclusion of cognitive science seem to me to have negative implications for the critical enterprise.

Bordwell's scepticism (to put it mildly) towards psychoanalysis connects to a wider area of disagreement over what criticism is, or should be, about. Like it or not, criticism is an engagement with the world. Films do not exist in a universe in which there are only films, and knowledges do not exist in a universe in which there is only one kind of knowledge. Writing about film is inevitably contaminated by the need to write not only about *Apocalypse Now!* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), but about Vietnam, not only about *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1993) but about Malcolm X, and also vice versa, and to apply not only aesthetic but political, socioeconomic, and psychological judgement. Many of the texts put under the microscope in *Making Meaning* are not just defective applications of film poetics but part of a wider engagement with aspects of the world which demand to be addressed. Sometimes too broad an engagement draws the critic into logical or empirical error or to the framing of unverifiable hypotheses, and Bordwell is not alone in finding examples of this in the pages of *Screen* among other places over the years. But often the apparent aporia derives from the implicit presence of a reasoning which the critic has carried out elsewhere and for which there is both intellectual and political justification. The extraneous element – the psychoanalysis, the feminism, the Marxism, the Catholicism – may be more important to the critic, and the critic's readers, in their engagement with the world than the film which is the ostensible object of criticism. The place of psychoanalysis in film studies cannot be reduced to that of a convenient heuristic tool which might or might not serve to validate readings of particular films. For some of us at least, psychoanalysis

is important for what it says about symbolic activity in general. If it also says something useful about the cinema in particular – and I think it does – so much the better.

It also follows from this that film criticism is, and always will be, eclectic and only partly scientific. Poetics or some other form of theory may be able to offer a set of descriptive procedures, but there will always be not just an impulse but an active need to draw on other knowledges and value systems to which the critic subscribes for reasons other than scholarly propriety. Questions addressed to film criticism, therefore, have to be addressed also to these other knowledges and value systems – to ask whether they are relevant, or tenable, and above all whether they are relevant and tenable in the context in which they are being applied. The context may not just be one of explicating a film for the supposedly blank-sheet minds of university students but of a struggle to relate it to something more urgent, or more general. The game of taking gobbets of criticism as so many examples of rhetoric is very misleading if it fails to draw attention to this context.

This connects to my misgivings about cognitive science. The bundle of activities collected loosely under that head contains much from which film studies can learn. Cognitivism is also, needless to say, a great advance over behaviourism, not least in its reinstatement of rationality into accounts of mental operations. But where cognitive science steps out of the laboratory into the field of social science it is in order to people the world with that implausible Frankensteinian monster the ‘rational agent’, playing the market of society rather as *homo oeconomicus* plays the economic market. It is comforting to be thought of as rational rather than as an empty black box (by behaviourism) or a precarious construction of drives and defences (by psychoanalysis). But is it right? And can it (any better than Freud, who at least tried) account for those gaps between reason and being, and between individual and species, which are known as cultures and societies and in which human life takes place? This is not to deny that a cognitivist approach – not only to perception but also to signification – has produced results of value for film study, sweeping past many pseudo-psychoanalytical and semiological shibboleths on its way. But film study is only partly about films, and equally, if not more, about the worlds in which they circulate. It is when this connection has to be made that cognitivism shows its limitations.

Finally, film studies as institution. Of the many subtexts of this book (and as an inveterate symptomatic reader I keep seeing subtexts where maybe the author would not wish it), this seems to me the most pressing. There is no panacea for the set of problems into which the film studies institution seems to have stumbled in recent years. But a reading of Bordwell’s book prompts me to make a modest proposal of my own. This relates to the question of ‘theory’.

'Screen' theory of the 1970s tended to collapse questions of theory into those of authority. To do theoretical work involved accepting the authority of a certain body of theoretical texts. Psychoanalytical criticism meant working on Freud and certain of his interpreters such as Lacan; historical materialism meant Marx, and Althusser; semiotics was Saussure, Hjelmslev, Jakobson. Since then, authorities have multiplied, but theories on the whole have not. It seems to me time to call a halt to the citing of authority in cases where that authority is a mere cipher standing in for, but not involving, a body of theory. Increasingly, names of authorities (persons, tendencies) have come to function like signposts. 'I am nearing Jameson, but am about to veer off towards Said'; 'I am deep inside deconstruction, but have to make a detour to avoid De Man'. Reading the map of theories and theorists is a useful exercise in self-orientation, but reading aloud from the map is not a theoretical practice. Authorities are not there to be invoked, like saints in the Catholic calendar, they are constituted and reconstituted by the work that is done on and through their work. If this work-on-work is not done, then the authority ceases to have meaning, except in academic ritual.

Academic ritual, however, demands not just the citing of sources (which makes sense) but the citing of authorities (which no longer does). Theory needs to thumb its nose at ritual, and to reconstitute itself without deference to any authority. This will undoubtedly produce a fair crop of disastrous attempts to reinvent the wheel or do without it entirely. But it will not be long before people rediscover that the creation and ordering of new knowledge is greatly aided by building on or otherwise engaging with the old, and new and old can enter a dialogue. Meanwhile, clarity and caution should be the only watchwords.